

Harry Potter and the Soul of the Hero Pt3

By: joe6991

<http://www.fictionalley.org/authors/joe6991/>

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/hero_trilogy/files/Soul%20of%20the%20Hero/

33 Chapters - Complete - Part 3 of 3 - 294,681 Words

Summery: Genre: Action, Romance - Multiple Eras: The Boy Who Lived has survived Sword and Defiance, but his fight has only just begun. Power enough to destroy Existence is growing in more than one source, and the War for Creation will burn all worlds. Beings of higher power, both Light and Dark, battle for dominance and caught in the middle is Harry Potter. But Harry has his own war to fight - against the Dark Lord - and humanity must unite if he is to win. We have reached the end, and change is coming, whether it be for good or ill. Harry must gamble again with everything on the line, even if it means damning his soul to an eternity of darkness... will he pay that price to save those he loves, or will he tear down Creation itself to destroy his enemies?

Prologue

There are many things across Existence that are beyond explanation. There are many things in our own world that refuse explanation. Some, mankind think they have explained, but more often than not we are wrong....

Take *war*, for example.

The wiser we get the greater the chance that our weapons, made for defence, will completely and utterly annihilate us from the face of this world. And yet we build bigger weapons, leave the old tools of mass destruction rotting in underground storage houses for the rust, and form more final battle plans.

Where is the explanation in that? Where is the *right* in keeping enough weapons technology on the surface of this world, and above it, that at any moment we could simply all be destroyed? One button pressed, and

there will be nothing but a barren, lifeless world, smouldering with smoking craters and whispered thoughts of good intentions.

And yet, those in power think this can be explained or justified! But that is when it comes back to the true nature of *war*.

Remember this, and remember it well:

Nothing is ever resolved without war. It is the way of the universe.

And we are not alone on our small planet in this universe.

Imagine, for a moment, that our world was under threat from an extraterrestrial force. Imagine that we were invaded by aliens, hell bent on wiping us off this world and making it their own.

Would our ticking time bomb of weapons be justified then? Perhaps....

But go further and realise the final implications of this. An intelligent, sentient life – something equal to or greater than our own, and they have come to destroy us – to take our home by force.

It would be one of the greatest days in human history, and for one reason....

It would be on this day, as we faced a threat out of this world, that we would finally realise, without a doubt and any preamble, that we are all one species on this planet. We are all human, and our petty differences over race or perspective were pointless.

Mankind would know world peace on the day their greatest threat descended from the heavens. It would be extraordinary. All our weapons of mass destruction, aimed at the heart of foreign nations, would no longer be needed to protect our borders – but our entire world as one.

We would be one species on this planet. Humanity as a whole, and if it was our fate to go down to this alien aggressor, then we would go down

as one, and we would go down with our guns blazing.

Remember:

Nothing is ever resolved without war. It is the way of the universe.

But, thankfully, there is no alien threat... yet... but who knows what the future holds.

There is a war coming to humanity though, a war for the ages that will finally reveal our destiny to us. In the beginning, the Universe was created... then what happened?

Good and Evil have been fighting an eternal struggle and it has come to a head in the form of young human boy, Harry Potter, who has the strength to set it all right. But first he must fight his own war – against the Dark Lord – and humanity must unite if he is to win.

Humanity must unite, and not just those of magic.

So much now rests on the blade of a razor, with the favour tilting in the balance of wrong, that before this is done everything will know, and remember, that we are here upon this world. And we will not be moved without a fight.

Time to be moving on then... we will return now, to the *end of the beginning*.

Chapter 1 – To Tread Once More Familiar Paths

*The most powerful weapon on earth
is the human soul on fire.*

~~ Ferdinand Foch

Matthew Jordan threw the tennis ball out into the swash of the sea and watched as his Labrador puppy, golden fur shining in the sun, hesitated just a moment before jumping into the wave after it. With her tail wagging, the dog ran back up the beach and dropped the ball obediently at his feet. Matt smiled and picked it up, looking to throw it again.

“Go get it, girl,” he said, and tossed it down the beach this time, down over the sand rise onto the lower shore.

The dog barked and Matt followed her after the ball. Looking around, Matt could see the damage that freak storm had caused to the sand dunes last night. The vegetation was torn apart and the sand hard and compact. It was weird, that storm had come out of nowhere.

Matt shook his head, thinking of all the work he now had to do back on the farm. That storm had destroyed all the hay bales he had left out in yesterday evening’s *sunshine*, and scattered it all across the property. Several cows were dead and some of the sheep had jumped the paddock. Yep, a lot of work – he might have to hire one or two of the lads from town to help. He was certain he would.

Lost in his thoughts, it took Matt five minutes to reach the lower shore and it was then that he realised his dog, Lucy, hadn’t come back with the ball. He frowned worriedly and stepped up his pace down the hill, looking for her amongst the piles of washed up seaweed and sand holes.

“LUCY!” Matt whistled. “HERE, GIRL!”

A bark, quick and urgent.

Matt whistled again and pushed his hat back on his head, giving his clear blue eyes a better look out at the empty beach. He sighed with relief when the young Labrador came bounding around a pile of drift wood, tail down and ball hanging almost limply in her jaws.

“What’s the matter, girl?” he asked her, kneeling down on his heels. Lucy

barked once and then shot off again around the wood and seaweed. Matt frowned and followed her.

He rounded the pile of wet drift wood and gasped, running forward as he saw Lucy licking the face of a bedraggled and pale figure lying on his back in the sand. Even from a distance Matt could see the blood on the... on the *boy's* jeans and his arms were bruised and bleeding as well.

On the edge of his mind Matt glanced around at the surrounding sand and registered that it looked scorched in parts, and some of it had solidified as if... as if it had been stuck by lightning. Had this kid been struck by lightning?

"Get away, Lucy," he said quickly, reaching down to the boy's neck for a pulse. Briefly, his eyes fell on the golden earring of a... lion... hanging from the boy's ear and glinting in the sun. "AWAY, I said."

He was pale, too pale. But he had a pulse... yes, he did – and it wasn't that faint. He was... was he sleeping?

Matt, still frowning, gently slapped his face back and forth. "Oy, mate," he said. "You want to wake up?"

The boy groaned and his eyes flickered open just for an instant before closing again. He coughed and tried to sit up. Matt helped him, blood already on his hands.

"Easy," he said. "Easy, easy. I think you've been hit by lightning, son."

The boy coughed again and this time when he looked up his eyes were open and clear, shining dazzlingly emerald green. For a moment Matt imagined he saw crackles of blue in those eyes, but that was impossible.

"What's... going on...?" the boy croaked and sat up now in the sand, holding his head. Matt got a closer look at him and saw that bruises crisscrossed his body, and that he had one or two cuts that lightning couldn't cause. Had he been attacked by something?

"You're okay," Matt said, kneeling next to him. "My name's Matt and I think we should get you up to Doctor Jackson. You... you think you can walk?"

The boy groaned. "Matt....?" he managed. "Where... am I?"

"You're down on the beach, " Matt replied, rubbing his stubble covered cheeks. "Can you remember what happened?"

The boy met eyes with him and Matt felt a feeling of... of what? Power, and of great distance. For a moment, he felt that he knew infinite. But that was odd, and gone a moment later.

The boy frowned. "I..." he began. "I don't know."

His black fringe fell back, it was matted with water and what could be blood, and Matt saw the strangest scar upon his forehead. It was shaped like, well like a bolt of lightning. Odd, who was this bloke?

"Okay," Matt said. "Let's get you up then. My truck's just a few hundred metres back up the beach. I'll take you to Doc. Jackson's. Can you tell me your name?"

The boy stood with a frown, swayed on the spot for a moment and rubbed his arms. They were numb, and sand had worked its way into his wounds. They were dirty and would probably become infected. One or two looked like they would need stitches.

"My name....?" he mumbled. "Ha..." he began, but then sighed and swayed again, waving his hand before his face as if to swat away a fly. "Ha..."

His mind was a flicker of empty thoughts and odd images of lightning and storms. He didn't know who he was, where he was, but it felt good to be here. He ached, his arms were sore and he had a hell of a headache. He couldn't remember his name.

"My name is...." It was on the tip of his tongue. "I'm... I don't know? Bugger...."

Matt watched the emotions pass over his face and nodded. "Okay," he said reassuringly. "We'll head up the beach. Come on, mate. Come on, Lucy."

It was slow going and the boy stumbled more than once. Matt had parked up in the car park at the end of the sand path down onto the beach. It was a five minute walk if you were fit, fifteen if you were lost and had been struck by lightning. The boy mumbled without realising as they moved up the beach, and Matt caught words like Guardian... and storm. It was odd.

Once they reached the truck, a white Holden Ute, Matt whistled Lucy up into the back and tied her lead against the bars next to a few bales of hay that had escaped the rain. He led the boy, who still looked deeply confused, around to the passenger door and seat belted him in. He seemed to have trouble focusing on anything.

"It's just a ten minute drive back to Wallingup," Matt told him, keying the ignition. The truck roared to life and Matt geared into reverse. "I'm sure your mum's probably worried about you."

The boy just stared at him with that expression of confusion, and Matt began to wonder if everything was all there upstairs. Matt drove quickly, not speeding, but faster than he normally would. He wondered briefly about the work that needed doing back on the farm, but thought that Jason, Jack and Ben would manage all right on their own for the morning. Melissa and Katherine would make the boys some lunch. Yeah, it would be right.

As they drove, Matt watched the boy stare out of the window at the passing countryside and bush, until it became homes and the town. If he had to put an age on the kid it would probably be about sixteen, although there were things that suggested he was older. His eyes, for one.

Although they appeared confused, it was as if they had seen.... well, *everything*. But he didn't know it.

Matt parked in the empty bays out front of Marvin Jackson's surgery and glanced at his wristwatch. Quarter to eight. Marv should be in by now, Julie as well. Matt thought it was a good sign when the kid unlocked his own seatbelt and got out of the Ute.

"Stay, Lucy," Matt called to his dog before leading the boy up the wooden ramp and through the mesh flyscreen. As he had expected, the place was empty of other patients. He lived in a small town after all, with only three hundred and fifty people. Most of them went to the hospital up in Karratha anyway.

"Follow me, son," he told the boy, and walked passed the waiting chairs and over to the reception counter. "Julie!? Julie, are you there? It's Matt Jordan."

There was shuffling from somewhere out of sight, and a woman came strolling through the door at the back, smiling in welcome until her eyes fell on the boy standing with a vague expression on Matt's left.

"Good morning, Matt," Julie said, straightening her name tag. "You get any damage from the storm last night?"

"Some, Julie," Matt smiled. "Is Marv in? There's someone I think may need to see him." Matt tilted his head towards the boy, who was frowning at the blood and dirt on the back of his hands.

Julie glanced at the boy and nodded. He was battered and bruised but did not seem to notice. "He's out back in the storeroom. Come on through and I'll tell him you're here."

Matt nodded and turned to the boy. "You remembered your name yet?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. The boy just shook his head. "Well let's go then."

Matt led the boy down a corridor and into the examination room. There was a desk littered with papers and a computer in one corner, with a hospital bed lining the wall, and two chairs sitting next to a larger leather one. On the walls were posted a lot of medical posters. Without being told to, the boy sat down in one of the smaller chairs, folding his hands into his lap.

"D'you remember anything at all, son?" Matt asked.

The boy looked up and again his eyes seemed to drill through Matt's. He shivered. "I... don't," he said, and Matt could not place his accent. It seemed to be a bit of everything, but possibly British. "I don't," he said finally.

They waited in silence for a few minutes, and Matt watched the boy read every chart in the room. That was something, at least, if he could read. Eventually a rather large man with a thick moustache and chubby cheeks, with thinning grey hair and a mischievous glint in his eye entered the room, white doctor's coat just reaching around his waist and stethoscope hanging around his neck.

"Matt Jordan, my good man," Doctor Marvin Jackson exclaimed, shaking Matt's hand. "Young Julie tells me you've had an accident."

"Good morning, Marv," Matt said, smiling. "Not me, mate," he finished and motioned towards the boy still just sitting quietly in the chair.

"Well now," Marv said, spotting the lad. "What have we here?"

"I'm not sure," Matt said, as the doctor sat down in the chair opposite the boy and met his gaze. Strangely, Matt thought Marv flinched under that gaze, but he couldn't be sure. "I found him down on the beach about half an hour ago, looking like that. He can't tell me who he is and I think he may have been struck by lightning."

Marv nodded, glancing at the boy's bruises and cuts, at his tattered clothes and odd boots. The looked to be made of some sort of leather,

like a crocodile or something. "No electrical burn marks...." he muttered. "But memory loss, you say, and it looks as though he's been put through the washer. Tell me, young man, how do you feel?"

The boy shrugged. "Fine," he said, and even though he looked anything but, Matt thought that he was telling the truth.

"Well," Marv said. "I'm the doctor so I'll give you a look at. Hop up on the table there and slips off your shirt."

The boy hesitated for a moment, but then did as he was told. He probably didn't know what else to do. As he removed his shirt though, the tattered black cotton rags, Matt and Marv both gasped at the bruises and bleeding gashes. There were also one or two scars that looked as though they would have been painful at the time. Especially on his shoulder, it was knotted lump of scar tissue, long since healed, but brutal nonetheless.

"You have been through the wars, son," Marv said, placing his hand on the boy's chest gently. "Can you take a deep breath for me... that's good. Now let it out. Right. A cracked rib or two I think. Doesn't it hurt?"

The boy shrugged in response.

Marv Jackson sighed. "Right then. You're going to need those cuts cleaned and stitches, as well as some bandages for that chest. Lie down."

The boy did so, and Matt took a seat as Marvin went about his job. Some of the gashes had sand and debris in them and Matt couldn't help but cringe and wince when Marv pulled out the splinters that were embedded deeply. Something that scared him though, and he saw that Marv was concerned too, was that the boy didn't once wince or cry out.

It was the oddest thing about him so far, and Matt wondered not for the first time just who this kid was.

Forty five minutes later and they were done. The boy sat up with bandages strapped across his chest and stitches in his arms and some on his cheek. He still carried that dazed, confused look but he looked more... normal now, if that made any sense. Marv told him that he would have to have those stitches removed in a fortnight, and then asked him who his family doctor was.

The boy shook his head, black dirty hair falling over the scar on his forehead. "I just... don't know," he said, and his voice wavered. It was the first emotion Matt had seen him show, and even then it wasn't much.

"Right...." Marv said, "sorry, mate, I forgot. I'm gonna assume you don't have a Medicare card so we'll just call it even on the stitches and bandages, alright?"

The boy was frowning and holding his head. He nodded though, and Marv helped him down off the table.

"Maybe you should take him on over to the police station, Matt," Marv offered. The boy visibly tensed and was on his guard. Marv continued. "To see if they've got him on file there, you know, or if anyone has reported him missing. I'm sure your family is worried about you, son."

The boy paused for a moment longer but then nodded. "Okay...." he mumbled.

Matt shook Marv's hand again. "I'll do just that. Who's on duty this morning?"

"Mike Caut's son, Harry—"

The boy stumbled and held his head again as if it pained him. He was looking down and when he looked up again his eyes were watering. "What.... what did you say?" he asked Marv.

"Em... Mike Caut's son, Harry," the doctor replied.

“Harry....” the boy mumbled. “Harry, Harry, Harry. I think, I think m’name’s Harry.”

The two men looked at each other for a moment and then Marv patted the boy on the shoulder. “Ah, you see,” he began. “You’ve taken a knock to the head. Don’t worry, it’ll all come back again.”

Matt nodded to Marv and then led Harry, yes Harry, back out onto the street. It was near ten o’clock now and he knew that Katharine would probably be wondering where he had got to. He just had to swing by the police station now, he’d give her a call from there. Lucy was lying asleep in a pile of hay on the back of the Ute and the boy, Harry, was glaring up at the sun with his hand shielding his eyes. He turned to Matt.

“Matt,” he said, and his voice was firm now. “Where am I?”

“This is Wallingup, Harry,” he said, but Harry’s face remained blank. “Up on the north-west coast of Western Australia. Ringing any bells?”

It meant nothing to Harry.

“Well... doc said it would come back, so let’s get over to the cop shop and see if the Harry over there can help us. Something might snap and you’ll remember....”

Harry nodded slowly. “Thank you,” he said, as he climbed back into the car and replaced his seatbelt. It was tight against his chest but only because of the bandages. He also couldn’t draw in a deep breath. “Thank you for helping me.”

Matt smiled. “Ah, think nothing of it. I try and do at least one good deed a day.”

In a town this size, that relied on the local farms and ranches to keep it alive, the police station was in fact, just a small building that held four officers and two police cruisers. Matt explained that there was a bigger town, but by no means a city, about fifty kilometres along the northern

highway. Someone would know him somewhere.

"G'day, Harry," Matt said as they entered the small building, once again opening the flyscreen. Harry found that odd, but could not say why.

"Matt Jordan, no trouble I hope?" a tall man with sparkling eyes said. He had a buzz cut and a straight, no nonsense moustache. He was also called Harry, Harry Caut.

"No, no trouble, Harry," Matt said, taking off his rimmed hat and placing it on the desk before him. Harry was the only officer on duty at the moment. In the small towns there was never much crime. The trouble usually came when the miners came in from the mines, but then it was never really bad then either. "I want you meet someone. He's also called Harry."

Harry stood next to Matt and took the offered hand of the policeman before him. He was dressed in a uniform with a shining badge and a gun on his hip. *Modified?* Harry wondered, and then shook his head. What did that mean? For a moment he was a bit concerned that he was wearing only a pair of dirty jeans. The bandages crisscrossed his chest, but he still felt exposed.

"Harry," the police officer Harry said, eyeing him warily. "You've got a good strong name, mate. You... you in some sort of trouble?"

Harry blinked. "I have no idea."

The older Harry's eyes flickered to Matt's, who said, "Found him down on the beach this morning and took him to see Doc. Jackson. Doesn't remember anything about who he is or even where he is. He only remembered his name because we mentioned you."

Older Harry nodded, and looked at Harry again. "True? Well isn't that something. You want me to see if I've got him on the computer?"

"If you could please, Harry," Matt replied. "Do you mind if I use the

phone?”

“Go for it, mate. Few minutes then. Help yourself to some coffee, fellas.”

Older Harry disappeared into the backroom, beyond a set of three cells with bars, and soon the tip-tap of a keyboard could be heard above the sound of Matt pouring coffee. Harry thanked him for his polystyrene cup and sipped at it without much strength. He decided that he didn't like coffee, and that was one more thing he knew about himself.

He was Harry and he did not like coffee.

“You know, I don't think you've got a place to stay” Matt said and Harry looked up at him from staring despondently at the floor. “If Harry doesn't find anything, son, well it's coming up mustering time, and I'll need a few extra hands around the property. It is a bit early, but what do you say, Harry? You can have one of the spare rooms, five hundred dollars a week – in advance, I suppose, so you can buy some clothes – and three meals a day.”

Harry shrugged. He was beyond confused now. He felt new to this world, to everything. Something told him he had been through it all before, but he had no memories whatsoever. Not a one. For all he knew, he simply existed somewhere completely different to what he knew. It was strange. He could do anything because he couldn't remember having any other duty.

And this offer did sound good, when compared to his current circumstances.

“I'll think about it,” he said, and then smiled. It was the first time he had done so, and it made him look younger – like he should.

Matt nodded, looking a bit nervous. “Well... can't have you going off and getting hurt again, can I? I'll just give Katharine, that's the wife, a call. Sit tight, mate.”

Harry zoned out as Matt, the Australian farmer with the deep tanned skin and square jaw, began talking to someone on the other end of the phone. Katharine, presumably. He looked at the dregs in his coffee cup and swirled them around absently. For a moment he thought that he would have preferred tea, and that was something also.

He was Harry, who did not like coffee and preferred tea.

Harry knew he was getting nowhere fast, and began to hope that this policeman would come back with some news about him, whether it be good or bad. Five minutes later the older Harry did come back, empty handed and frowning.

“Nothing I’m afraid,” he said, glancing from Matt to Harry. “No one matching your description, mate, has been reported missing. I can follow this further, if you like, make some calls and have a notice put out for you. It’ll take time though, possibly a week or two with the resources here, have you got somewhere to stay?”

Harry opened his mouth to reply but then stopped, glancing sideways at Matt, who nodded. “I do,” he eventually said. “I’ll be working for Matt, and staying in his spare room.”

Older Harry smiled. “Good show. And if the old drongo gives you any trouble,” the officer went on, smiling and nudging his head towards Matt, “you come and see me and I’ll sort him out.”

Matt laughed. “Come on then, Harry,” he said. “We’ll go buy you a shirt and jeans – some work boots as well. The wife won’t let you anywhere near her house looking as you do now!”

*Old
The
March 21st*

*Transylvanian
Carpathian*

*Underworld
Mountains*

Buried and furrowed deep in the high mountains in the forgotten, most desolate part of the world, a community of dark creatures met for the first time in over five hundred years. Their homes were systems of caves and deep underground caverns that stretched for hundred of miles across the face of the world, and deep down into it.

Centuries of terrible deeds and wrong doings had twisted this place into the second most feared location on the planet. The first being the lost fortress of Salazar Slytherin, which rumour said had recently been rediscovered by Slytherin's descendant – the greatest Dark Lord to have ever lived. That was one of the reasons the creatures gathered around a table of skulls were meeting this evening.

All fourteen of the Fourteen Vampire Clans had not met in five hundred and thirty seven years – not since the humans had banded together and managed to decimate seven clan leaders who had lived for millennia. That was an embarrassment that would not be forgotten, and the thirst for revenge in these horrible and dark creatures was as great now as it had been the day it had happened.

Fourteen old vampires, both male and female, stinking of decay and murder, were arranged around the table so that not one of them had a higher sitting than Masorn, their overlord. His flesh was rotted and his thirst for blood unquenchable, but he was the elder and the strongest of the Vampires. He cradled a goblet of fresh human blood as he sat in his throne, surveying the leaders of his clans.

"He has come," Masorn whispered, yellow fangs dripping with blood and pain. His eyes were yellow, surrounded by red streaks that almost completely blotted out the white. "You all feel *his* pull. Sometime within the last day, our doom has entered the world."

The fourteen vampires shrieked and hissed, some lashing out at the skull table and crushing the bone of the humans. But none of them could deny, would dare deny it. They had all felt the pull of the Darkslayer as strongly as he.

Masorn tapped his long claws on the steel arm of his cold throne, thinking and calculating, trying to make sense of what had happened the previous evening. Not many in any world knew it, but vampires were sensitive to life of other worlds, to changes in the fabric of existence, and last night something tremendous and unprecedented had happened.

Someone, or something, had changed the fabric – rewritten the thread of Existence.

“Darkslayer,” Masorn growled, and crushed the goblet in his hand, his hole filled and rotting body tensed as he did. Blood flowed down through his hands and arm. “Hero of the Light, Lord of Salvation, Bane of Darkness... call him what you will, he is here – upon this very world. We must destroy him.”

The fourteen clan leaders, eight female and six male, shrieked their approval, and many screamed for the honour of killing the Darkslayer.

“How, my lord?” Unor, of the Fourteenth Clan asked. He was a tall creature, with long folded black wings and a muscular chest. Burnt upon it was the Dark Mark – glowing green skull with wrapped around serpent – a sign that Unor had sworn his clan to fight alongside the Dark Lord Voldemort. A few other clans had done the same, five of the fourteen, and Masorn encouraged it. Lord Voldemort was a great ally.

“With patience, Unor,” Masorn spat. “And well laid plans. Despite our fears, the Darkslayer is but one man – a mortal human. We will test him first, against a handful of our brothers and sisters. One will watch from the shadows, and report back on this man.”

“What of the Dark Lord’s defeat in Scotland, my lord?” Sruvia hissed between perfectly shaped white fangs. She was a short woman, but that in no way reduced her stature or power. She was considered beautiful amongst the clans, and ruthless. She had slept and murdered her way to the leader of her clan over two hundred years ago.

“That was not a defeat!” Grolm said, the Dark Mark blazing on his grey

chest. "The Dark Lord defeated his mortal enemy, Harry Potter – the Boy Who Lived – and reduced Hogsmeade to ash, destroying hundreds of Aurors. He was weakened by his duel with the Potter boy, that is true, but his power has grown since. He will return, and destroy his enemies."

"Your devotion to this Dark Lord is questionable, Grolm," Sruvia replied, and many other leaders not sworn to Voldemort murmured their agreement.

"My devotion is first and foremost to Lord Masorn," Grolm shot back.

"*Silence...*" Masorn himself whispered. "In time, my sons and daughters, we will place our full strength behind the Dark Lord Voldemort, but for now we have a more pressing problem. The Darkslayer, you bickering fools. The man prophesized to destroy us. He is thousands of miles away south... you can all feel that. We must work our plans this evening to ensure his destruction."

*Three
April 11th, 1997*

Weeks

Later

"Another bleeding owl!" Ron Weasley spat and tore up the letter before finishing the first line. Harry had been gone for three weeks now, and still he was showered with dozens of letters a day from people all over the world asking him about his friendship with the Boy Who Lived. "I'm gonna make myself unowable," he grumbled.

"They are getting a bit much," Hermione Granger agreed, staring at the unopened pile before her. "Just eat your bacon, Ron, and ignore it."

It was Friday morning at Hogwarts, and the entire school was gathered around their house tables for breakfast. The staff were up on their table as well, and Hermione stared thoughtfully at Professor Dumbledore whilst swirling her spoon in her cereal.

Harry had been gone three weeks – three weeks and two days – and even now the strain could be felt in the castle and outside of it. A worldwide search had been in progress for two weeks, but so far it had turned up nothing. Hermione had spoken to Ginny about it, about how he had disappeared, and had since spent almost every spare moment she had researching this *time and space* magic in the library.

She had found nothing – absolutely nothing. Nothing about what it was, what it did, why it did it, where it could possibly have taken Harry. Hermione realised she had tears in her eyes again, and sniffed whilst swatting them away.

“You wanna talk about it?” Ron asked sadly, poking at his bacon. His appetite had been dampened by Harry’s disappearance.

“No....” Hermione sighed. “No. I’m just being stupid. He’ll be back soon and that’ll be that.”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, he’ll be back.”

“He will be, Ron,” Hermione said fiercely.

Ron sighed and dropped his fork, pushing his plate away. “I believe you, I do,” he said. “It just seems so hopeless.”

A small voice on Hermione’s right spoke up. “Not hopeless, just tiring,” Ginny Weasley said, resting her head on her palm and playing with her own food. No one seemed to want to eat much these days. Not knowing what had happened to Harry was the worst part, and it kept them all in a constant state of despair and hope.

“Ginny’s right,” Hermione nodded, not certain if she was telling herself or Ron. Ron, it was Ron. “We’re all tired and,” she put her hand over Ron’s, “and we have to keep things together here for when he does get back.”

Ron nodded. “You make it sound so easy... don’t suppose Dumbledore told you anything new lately?”

"If he did, you'd be the first to know," Hermione replied. "And you, Ginny."

Animated chatter around the Great Hall was all that Ron heard as another, less painful, topic of conversation was searched for. He thought about Quidditch practice for tomorrow but knew that it would be hard to replace Harry as Seeker – especially because it was so soon after he left... but Dumbledore had decided it would be safe and good for morale if a match were held.

"We still have to start organising the DA properly," Ron said after the silence had stretched on uncomfortable. "You know, like Dumbledore said."

And Harry wanted. It always came back to Harry. Ron thought that his best friend did not know half of the things that he affected. Not even half.

"Meeting Monday night," Hermione said. "That'll give us a chance to plan over the weekend. It won't be easy, especially without... well, without Harry, but we can do it. Neville and Luna will help."

"I don't know if I want to help anymore...." Ginny mumbled, rolling Harry's ring, a silver one, around in her palm. She wasn't looking up, but Hermione judged from the way she was shaking slightly that she was trying *very* hard not to cry again. "It's just so hard...." she moaned. "I don't know... I don't know how Harry managed to last all these years."

"It'll help if you're there, Gin," Ron said, running a hand back through his hair. "People look up to you like they did Harry... like they *do* Harry, because you and him... well, you know."

"Because he loved me...." Ginny finished, squeezing her hand around the ring. "But I was useless when he disappeared, Ron," she continued hotly, attracting one or two looks from those seated around her. "Harry did it all, and I could do nothing to help. He sacrificed himself and...."

Ginny got up and ran from the Hall. Hermione sighed and went after her, leaving Ron alone with his mail. Cursing deeply, he stood up and removed his wand from up his sleeve.

"Incendio," he growled, and the envelopes burst into flames. Ron swore again and then stormed out of the Hall with hundreds of pairs of eyes upon him. No one said anything, most felt the same way. Angry, with the war... that was coming.

Ron was also still smarting over the escape of Draco Malfoy, and it was thoughts of revenge on the blonde Slytherin that kept him going up to his first lesson of the day, Transfiguration. Malfoy would pay for portkeying them to Voldemort, forcing Harry out into a duel with the Dark Lord. It wasn't fair, and Malfoy would pay.

"He will...." Ron whispered, staring at the wall with his wand clenched tightly in his hand. "I'll kill him... I will."

"It's okay to be afraid, Ginny," Hermione said, wiping away the tears on her best friend's face. "We're all afraid, and there is nothing wrong with that."

Sitting on the sinks in the girl's bathroom on the second floor, Ginny sniffed and tried to smile. "Harry was never afraid, Hermione. Not once. You should have seen him... he just took whatever V-Voldemort threw at him, and gave as good as he got."

Hermione put an arm around her shoulders, sighing. "I think Harry might have been afraid, but he just did what had to be done despite that. Anyway... you still haven't told me how you managed to corner him after five years. What was it? Did you confess feelings for one another whilst he was healing in the hospital wing? Or perhaps you both just came to love each other slowly? What about a stolen kiss atop of the Astronomy Tower?"

Ginny did smile then. "The last one," she said, and Hermione's eyes widened and she grinned. "Harry..." she began to laugh, "Harry was so

confused he didn't know what to do.... he... he... jumped off the tower and turned into a griffin. Couldn't get away fast enough!"

"You see," Hermione said, glad Ginny was smiling and laughing again. "He does get scared."

"I miss him so much, Hermione."

Hermione didn't think she would cry again so soon. "Me too, Ginny... me too."

Monday
The Room of Requirement

Evening

"Well that's the plan," Ron said, fitting into this public speaking position better than he thought he would. "The DA isn't just going to be a duelling club – not anymore. Harry had a plan, a vision, for this place. A student guard, the warriors of Hogwarts, and we intend to do just that. A network throughout the castle to root out traitors and spies, nightly patrols until dawn. The whole deal. Anyone that wants to leave may – please do not let the door hit you on the way out."

None of the one hundred students seated in wooden chairs around the rather large Room of Requirement did so. A mixture of fifth, sixth, and seventh years – there were even fifteen Slytherins in the group. All of them had signed a contract, put their name on the Parchment of Intentions, and all of them had been found loyal to the DA and its aims.

"That's what I like to see," Ron nodded, proud to be a member of the DA. He took his position a lot more seriously since Harry couldn't be here to do his part. It was his responsibility, as Harry's second – duel partners – to ensure everything continued to run smoothly. With Harry gone the DA had had its head cut off, but Ron would make sure the body would still function until that blasted head could be found.

“We have here,” Hermione took over from Ron. She, like most in the room, was dressed in the dragon armour Harry had bought them all with his money two months ago – and the white battle robes she had since ordered from the duellist’s shop in Diagon Alley. The DA had a budget, laid out by Harry, of five million galleons. A very large fortune and more than they could ever spend.

It was Sirius’s money, of course, that he had left to Harry on the event of his death. Hermione knew Harry had plenty more, and would still when he came back. *When* he came back.

Hermione continued, “We have here a ring,” she said. “White gold with a glowing green emerald set in the metal. They have been enchanted to fit your fingers, and only a registered member of the DA is able to wear one. Other enhancements include the stone – the emerald – it’ll shine green when there is a meeting, and there are one or two other charms in there, that we’ll cover later.”

“The rings are important,” Ron said, standing straight in the front of the group. He looked impressive in his full battle wear, tall as he was, his eyes straight and serious. “Not only are they Portkeys back on to Hogwarts ground, but just wearing them will be enough to make sure that those in the younger years – the kids – know that something is being done, by people they know and trust, to protect them here. Take care of them and the trust that will bring. If anyone abuses that position, it will mean expulsion from the DA and possibly Hogwarts.”

“T-Things are going to be a bit hectic o-over the next couple of weeks,” Neville Longbottom began with just the smallest hint of nerves. He stood in between Ron and Hermione up the front of the room on the elongated stage before the sea of faces. “It will take a few meetings and a lot of hard work to get us up and running the way Harry wanted, and I, for one, intend to put in that hard work. Nothing like what happened with Draco Malfoy will *ever happen again* with the DA at Hogwarts.”

Surprisingly, and much to Neville’s embarrassment, this was met with cheers and claps, and one or two wolf whistles. Luna Lovegood stood

behind him and she stroked his shoulder with a smile. He muttered something to her and stepped back as Ron took the initiative again.

“Nev’s right,” he said, making sure to stare into each and every face. “It is going to be hard, but that means we’re doing the right thing. Nothing that is truly good is ever easy – Harry told me that – and we’re going to have a force here to make him proud when he gets back.” This was met with silence, contemplative and respectful. Ron sighed and shook his head, glancing sideways at his sister standing next to Hermione. “Form a line from left to right, and we’ll hand out the rings.”

Across the castle, within Albus Dumbledore’s study, another meeting was taking place – one of another group of defenders, from all walks of life. The Order of the Phoenix. Fawkes, the red and golden phoenix sat on his shining perch and sung softly, almost sadly, as the members of the Order made and discussed their plans.

Headmaster Dumbledore, eyes twinkling and beard hanging to his waist, smiled warmly at his phoenix and noted that his feathers were slightly rumpled around his wings – he was approaching a burning day – which was good, because a phoenix burning always brought change, or so the legend went.

“So that’s the latest,” Minister for Magic Arthur Weasley sighed, rubbing his tired eyes and looking wistfully at the fireplace, wishing to get home to bed. He had been awake for the past forty hours. “Hogsmeade is still under construction, as are the Auror Headquarters outside of the castle, and the search for Harry continues.”

Seated around the room were many familiar and friendly faces – some not so friendly and others frowning and brooding. Severus Snape wasn’t a friendly face, but those of Fred and George Weasley were, along with Molly, Bill and Charlie. Nymphadora Tonks alongside Kingsley Shacklebolt – who owed his life to Harry – stood by Amos Diggory and Mundungus Fletcher. Remus Lupin leant against the wall looking haggard, nearby sat Minerva McGonagall and Alastor ‘Mad-Eye’ Moody.

Further around them, stationed around Dumbledore's tables of fancy instruments and glowing apparatus', were Dedalus Diggle and Elphias Doge, and seated in a large chair of his own was Rubeus Hagrid. Hestia Jones was to his right, as was Emmeline Vance – and she completed the main members of the Order.

"There have been reports of increased vampire activity in old Transylvania – I think we all know where I'm talking about – over the last few weeks," Kingsley Shacklebolt gave his report. "Rumour has it all fourteen clans met to discuss something of great importance to the vampires, though Merlin knows what it was. Can't be good for us, at least."

"The vampires are half a world away and not our problem," Snape spat, hands folded deeply into his dark robes. "Our problem is that the Dark Lord is recovering more swiftly everyday, and soon he will become a threat once more."

"Then we have to find Potter soon," Moody growled. "Have you talked to the Americans about putting out a search, Albus?"

Dumbledore nodded, all twinkle lost from his eye at the mention of Harry. "Indeed I have, and they said they will do what they can... Harry is a high profile wizard, and if he is in America he is there illegally – without documentation – so time will tell."

"You don't sound overly hopeful," Molly Weasley grumbled. Losing Harry had been like losing one of her own.

"To be honest, Molly, I am not. Harry will not be found by us – the magic that took him... it is greater than we can imagine. When he comes back, I fear he will be different."

"We cannot abandon the search," Arthur Weasley objected. "We will not abandon the search. No one knows what that magic did – he could be a mile away for all we know."

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly, but it was clear he did not share Arthur's faith.

"There is also the International Confederation to consider, and the International Alliance," Arthur switched topics, though eventually everything always came back to Harry. It was as if that boy pulled strings in every aspect of their lives – even when he was missing.

"It will be difficult to sway the majority of votes in the Confederation to have this war – the Second Dark War – classified as a World War. Only then will the other countries honour their position within the International Alliance. As it stands, we have perhaps twelve nations behind us."

"How many nations are there?" Fred Weasley asked, sporting his dragon hide jacket.

"One hundred and twenty two magical governments worldwide," Dumbledore sighed. "Each with their own problems, with their own nest of dark wizards just waiting for Voldemort to call them to his legion. Auror recruitment must increase, Arthur. It must!"

"There have been over one hundred and fifty applicants within the last month!" Tonks exclaimed. "The highest in recorded history. When that writer released that book about Harry, recruitment skyrocketed and is expected to continue."

Dumbledore met her eyes and sighed again. "It will not be enough... this next time, when the war begins again... I fear Tom will settle for nothing less than total domination. Voldemort will either rule the world or raze it to the ground. We need more Aurors."

"We need Harry Potter," Moody whispered, his eye spinning fast. Every other eye in the room turned to look at him silently. He clicked his remaining teeth together and growled, "You know the Prophecy as well as I do. Without Harry none of this will mean anything."

There was silent, and to some heartbreaking, agreement.

“Just because... just because things have taken a turn for the worse, Ronald,” Hermione lectured at one of the many tables near the windows in the Gryffindor common room. “Doesn’t mean you can slack off on your homework or study. We still have our exams in a month or so, you know.”

Ron sighed and turned the pages of his Charms text absent mindedly, head resting in his palm. “I really can’t summon up the strength to care, Hermione,” he stressed. “This last month, and every day that follows, just keeps... *draining* me.”

Hermione nodded, staring without seeing at the table before her. She felt the same way. It was just... hard... to keep up a normal life, or something similar, when one of her best friends, whom she loved, was missing – wounded and presumed dead by many.

“Keep a strong face up for Ginny though, Ron,” Hermione said. “It’s hard enough for her without seeing it getting you down.”

Ron nodded quickly, strongly. “Of course... you wanna work on the DA roster? Dumbledore wanted it within the week.”

Hermione smiled sheepishly. “I finished it,” she said. “Free period yesterday which I spent in the library, searching for anything that could help us find Harry, I got frustrated at my lack of progress, and drew up the roster then. Decided on only sixth and seventh years patrolling at night, in pairs.”

Ron smiled, and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Hermione blushed. “Thanks, Ron.”

Ron nodded and turned back to his books, glaring at the pile of

homework he had to do. Some Charms... DADA... and Transfiguration. *Transfiguration*, he thought. *McGonagall mentioned Animagus training....*

"Are you going to see if you can become an Animagus?" Ron asked Hermione, as she began scratching a few notes onto some parchment. Outside the nearby window an owl hooted, and something in the back of Ron's head clicked. He frowned.

"Of course," Hermione said with enthusiasm. "Think about it – I could be something that can fly, or swim. It would be amazing."

Ron nodded, having lost interest in the question. The owl, somewhere outside, hooted again. "Hermione...." he began slowly. "When was the last time you saw Hedwig?"

Hermione looked up at him and frowned, but then her eyes widened in realisation. "Ron!" she exclaimed. "You're a genius!"

Ron smiled. "I know, but when?"

Hermione thought back furiously over the last month, searching her mind for any sighting of Harry's snowy owl. She couldn't recall seeing her once. "At least... at least a month. Ron, do you think....?"

He nodded. "I do, but let's check the owlery first."

Excited, feeling a bloom of hope in their stomachs, Ron and Hermione abandoned their study and almost ran from the common room. A few people shouted after them, asking where they were going – it was after nine and everyone had to be in their house by then – but they didn't stop.

As expected, the castle was empty and now the two of them did run through it, hand in hand, along the winding corridors and through one or two secret passages, up moving stairs and through keystone arches.

The owlery was locked, but Hermione flicked her wand and the door flew

open as they approached, revealing a tall room with a wide open roof and walls – dozens of nesting boxes and perches rising up the walls were mostly empty, as owls hunted at night, but Ron smiled.

“I haven’t seen her – not once since Harry disappeared. She went after him,” he said, unable to keep the smile off his face.

Hermione wanted to smile as well, but it wasn’t much to go on. “She... Hedwig could be out hunting, Ron.”

Ron just shook his head. “No, she went after him. Do you- do you know anyway to track a postowl?”

It was Hermione’s turn to shake her head, as she gazed up through the open roof at the thousands of stars visible overhead. The universe, her universe, and light from distant long forgotten stars that other worlds circled. For a moment, she felt very small, and then answered Ron’s question, linking her arm through his.

“No, it can’t be done,” she sighed. “Once they’re gone they can’t be tracked. You could follow one, or attach a tracking device to it... but once they’re gone....” Ron was still smiling. “I don’t think this is anything to smile over, Ron. We can’t find Harry this way. Nothing has changed... it doesn’t mean anything.”

Ron put his arm across her shoulders and held her close, gazing up at the night sky himself. The stars really were amazing. “Yes it does,” he told her. “It means everything. We know Harry is alive, which is a damn sight more than we knew five minutes ago.”

Hermione’s eyes suddenly lit up with more than starlight. “We can send him an owl,” she said quickly. “An owl with a tracking device! I can make one; I’ll just need a few books from the library. Come on.”

“What...? Now?”

Hermione nearly pulled Ron’s arm out of his socket. “Yes now. We’ll go

and get the invisibility cloak and work through the night if we have to!"

Chapter 2 – Memories of Pain

As memory can be a paradise from which we cannot be driven, it can also be a hell from which we cannot escape.

~~John Lancaster Spalding

The Boundary

The Guardian, Godric Gryffindor, floated in the darkness that was his sector of the massive, all consuming Boundary that separated all the mortal universes from one another, and kept the realms of the Immortal beings from interacting with the humans of the mortal realms – not that the immortals had ever wanted to.

Gryffindor swirled in the Boundary contemplating the growing sense of unease throughout Existence and the whispers of a threat bigger than the one Harry Potter had defeated coming to light. Thinking of Harry brought him back to the Ways of Twilight and the block he had placed in the boy's memory.

It had been necessary, the Guardian knew. The boy could not handle all the memories swirling through his mind, and it was shutting down because of it. If he didn't die he would have lived life unable to understand anything, mentally barren and weak. With the block in place though... his memories would have time to sort themselves out and release themselves when Harry is ready.

Still, the threat was becoming more and more apparent. Rumour had it that the Destroyers, sworn enemies of the Guardians, had taken up the campaign once again to destroy the universes, and plunge Existence into complete and utter darkness....

Such a thing was possible now, Gryffindor knew. It had almost happened once in time, due to the evil in Harry Potter's scar link that had torn holes throughout the entire fabric. It was known by creatures that didn't serve the Light that it could be done, and rumour was slowly growing into fact.

Gryffindor wondered briefly if Harry Potter knew what was happening. Something told him that that boy had not finished affecting the plans of higher beings, or changing the rules set down at the beginning of time. He still had a part to play – perhaps to destroy evil again....

The first battle for existence had been won, thanks to Harry Potter – but the final War for Creation was just heating up. A lot of things were out of place, not everything was as it should be. The Destroyers were gathering. Time was short, and the Guardian knew that they may not have Potter to rely on this time. Would it be fair to even ask him?

Confusion swept across the mind of the Guardian, and it was a long time before he decided upon a course of action. And it would be an even longer time before the full repercussions of his choice rippled away to... nothing.

April 24th

Harry keyed the ignition of the Holden Ute and pushed it up into First, feeling for the biting point of the clutch as he did so. Dressed in his work clothes, boots, shorts and a chequered shirt, he had spent a little over a month on the Jordan property, working the farm.

Three weeks ago Matt had shown him how to drive, and it was something they had practiced several hours a day for about five days, until Matt (and Harry himself) was confident enough that he could handle the Ute from one end of the property to the other.

The Jordan's owned a cut of land quite large just on the coastal plains of the north west of Western Australia, and their farm stretched for about five kilometres in every direction. It was crisscrossed with roads to paddocks and hay fields, and Harry couldn't work, and earn his living,

without being able to drive back and forth.

Of course he was not allowed and hadn't been on the public roads. He didn't hold a driving licence, and driving as he was even now was illegal – but Matt had smoothed over the finer details, and insisted he learn how to drive. Harry had to admit that it came to him fast, learning how to drive, as if he had known it before.

That brought him back to his memories – or lack thereof. Nothing, absolutely nothing came back to him about his life before waking up on that beach a month ago. His wounds had healed, his stitches had been removed a few weeks ago because he had healed quicker than expected, but his mind was a total blank.

He was Harry, he knew. He felt that with a certainty – but everything else seemed to be stuck behind some... some sort of *block*. Occasionally weird things happened – he had fast reflexes, abnormally fast, Matt's wife Katharine had said more than once – and now and again he would look at something and feel a triggering in his mind, as if it should inspire a memory that... just was not there.

There was no time to think about that though. He had to get the Ute out to the east paddock and load up the new bales of hay he and Matt, and Matt's other employees – including his son and daughter – had collected and tied off yesterday.

Going slow, Harry eased the Ute through a patch of ground still a bit muddy from the storms a few weeks back, and then pushed it up into Third. The east paddock was four kilometres away and the road was fairly straight. He would be there in minutes.

Still, those minutes gave him the unfortunate chance to think about himself – something he tried to avoid as it fast became beyond frustrating. All he knew was his name, and no more. The police had turned nothing up and Harry thought they had ceased to try very hard since it seemed he was hanging around for awhile yet. Then there were the other things.

After working a full day Harry felt aches in places all over his body, and closer inspection by Doc. Jackson told him that he had broken his leg

twice, his arms several times, and his ribs almost beyond count. The ropy scar tissue in his shoulder was also examined and x-rayed, but as far as the doctor could tell, whatever had happened to it the wound had healed naturally, over time. He said it was a hell of a thing to have to heal over time – without medical assistance.

There were also the pains in his forehead that struck unexpectedly and at times mercilessly. Just across that lightning bolt scar he had, pain tore through his skull and it made his eyes water. Sometimes it was sensitive to the touch, other times it tingled. Most times it hurt, though only flares of pain in the beginning. Since then they had been steadily increasing.

Two hundred bales, he thought, driving parallel to the paddock fence, twenty needed over for the cows and horses in the barns... another ten for the west paddock. He would be out here all day, but he didn't mind the work. It paid well, he thought, and gave him a place to stay.

Harry was out all morning in the sun, and his rimmed hat protected his face and neck against the worst of it. He was soon sweating, lifting a bale of hay from the ground onto the back of the truck, and could feel his arms burning again, as were his legs.

Over the last month he had developed quite a suntan, and his muscles had clearly grown across his entire body. It had become a lot easier to work, and Harry was looking forward for when Matt would dust his crops – he had been promised a flight in the biplane. He, of course, could never remember going flying – so it would be an experience to remember.

A new memory, to replace whatever he had lost.

And what have I lost? he wondered, not for the first time. Picking up another heavy bale of hay, Harry lugged it through the gate and dumped it with a bang on the edge of the Ute, pushing it further back. *Who was I before this?*

It was a question he desperately wanted an answer to, and one that might be unwise to know. He had spoken a lot with Matt's daughter, Melissa, about this. She was sixteen and went to school weekdays in the town. She had voiced concerns that it might be better not to know, that

perhaps he forgot everything because the truth was terrible.

It was possible, he knew. But given the choice he would choose to have his memories returned to him. If he had any, that was. He couldn't be sure. Nothing remained before that morning on the beach. Nothing.

Several bales of hay later and the morning wore on. Harry drove back to the farmhouse at eleven thirty with the Ute loaded to capacity. Lunch was at twelve and he had worked up quite an appetite this morning. He was looking forward to whatever Katharine cooked up, because it was always good.

Not like what the elves make, he thought absent-mindedly, *but still good*.

Five seconds later the Ute came to a screeching halt still about a kilometre from the house, and Harry sat with his hands gripping the wheel and a pale look upon his face. He mouthed the word, "Elves..." and stared ahead at the road without seeing it.

Where had that come from? *Elves...* It was one of those odd occurrences, he knew. And they may as well not have happened for all the use they were. *Elves...* weren't real. At times, with only these brief memory lapses to live with, Harry felt like he was trapped inside of a fantasy novel.

Fantasy is reality, he thought this time – and his grip on the wheel tightened until the leather creaked beneath his palms.

Now what could that mean?

The drive back to the house from then on was very confused, but nothing else came to him, and what had was utterly useless. It didn't tell him anything about himself, and he had no images in his mind to go with these words. At times he just wanted to hit his head until it surrendered his memories, but something told him that would not do any good.

He supposed that was just common sense, and not some buried instinct.

"Hello, Harry!" Jason Jordan called from the front porch of his family's three storey home. He was seated around the long, twelve seater outdoor table with his sister, Melissa, the two other farmhands – Jack

and Ben – and his mother Katharine. “Come on up for lunch.”

Harry turned the Ute off and slipped the keys into his shirt pocket. He watched the family from behind his silver anti-flash sunglasses as he walked up to the house. They were happy, he knew, with the life they had. Living and working on the farm, Melissa and Jason with plans for university after school, and all in all everyone was in perfect health. Vaguely, Harry hoped that if he did remember his life, it was something like this – if not, then he hoped it was just happy.

“You lift all that hay by yourself!?” Katharine Jordan asked, swatting away a few flies from the food on the table before her. She was a tall woman with long black hair and a deep suntan from years spent in the country. Beneath her sunglasses, her eyes were blue.

Harry took a seat between Jason and Melissa. Jason was fifteen and a year and a half younger than his sister. He took more after his father with brown hair and eyes, a square jaw and a well built, athletic frame. Melissa looked more like her mother, and Harry knew that she was nigh on identical to Katharine when she was that age.

“Didn’t take long,” he sighed, accepting a glass of ice water with a nod of thanks. A plate of sandwiches and cool fruits appeared before him as well, slid across the table by Katharine. “I’ll take it on over to the barns this afternoon, and then go back for the rest before dark.”

Katharine *tsked* audibly and waved her finger before his face. “You’ll work yourself to death, Harry, and then what will I tell Matt when he gets back from the sheep markets?”

“I don’t mind the work,” he shrugged, lifting his glasses up onto his forehead. The world was bright for a moment, but then his eyes adjusted. Melissa burst out with laughter as he did.

“Harry,” she laughed, “you’ve got a killer of a sunglasses tan!”

Harry smiled and bit into his beef sandwich. “Thanks for pointing that out,” he said.

“I’ll help you with the hay this arvo, Harry,” Jason said, peeling an apple with a steak knife. “Get it done in half the time.” Harry nodded.

“What about you, Ben? Jack?” Katharine asked, fanning herself with a paper fan. “What are you boys up to this afternoon?”

“Fixing the Honda Foreman,” Jack sighed, rubbing his cheeks in thought. “Crankshaft cracked the other day when Matt didn’t see that ditch in the south field, and went straight into it. Did a bit more damage as well.”

“How long will that take?”

“Rest of today and most of tomorrow,” Ben chimed in. “That’s if Matt remembers to buy the new spark plugs and cylinders.”

“You want to help Harry and Jason, Mel?” Katharine asked Melissa.

She shrugged indifferently. “Can do, I suppose. Get it finished in a third of the time.”

Jason snorted. “Yeah, right,” he laughed. “We’ll be out till midnight with her *helping*, Harry.” Harry suppressed a smile.

Melissa glared and stamped her foot on the wooden decking indignantly. “Well if I don’t come poor Harry’s gonna just have you for company, and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone!”

Harry did laugh now.

“Play nice, children,” Katharine said.

Finishing his second sandwich, Harry drained his glass of ice water and stood up, stretching his limbs. His aching joints cracked with satisfaction and Melissa winced as he popped his right shoulder. It had been a... talent... of sorts, he had discovered he possessed. If he rotated his shoulder in just the right way, the bones grated against one another and clicked. It drove Melissa mad to no end.

“Oh, don’t do that,” she groaned.

Harry smiled. “You wanna get going then? We can... ah...” He stumbled, holding his forehead, and had to lean against the table for support.

Katharine gasped and jumped up with concern. “Harry! What—?”

He stood alone before a demon with red eyes... a pale white face that the devil himself would fear... Lord—

He winced and sat back down. “Y-Yeah....” he said, clearing his throat. “Yes. I’m fine... I think I just remembered something.”

Jason raised an eyebrow. “Really? What?”

God knows what it was! Harry shuddered. *A monster.* “Not sure... it was just a picture in my head. It might have been from a horror film, or something....”

“Well, not sure if that’s a good sign,” Ben half-joked. “Myself, if I lost my memory I’d want to remember my mum first.”

Katharine smiled. “That’s sweet, Ben.”

“Maybe you should take the afternoon off,” Melissa suggested. “We can go jump in the pool.”

“That might be a good idea,” Katharine agreed.

Harry thought about it for a moment, and then shook his head. “No,” he began. “It seems to help if I’m not thinking about remembering something, if you follow me. While I’m working my mind isn’t on memories... it helps.”

Helps what? he wondered. *What normal person thinks of elves and has as many scars as you do, both inside and out? What normal person has memories of standing before a monster?*

Harry didn’t know the answer to his questions, and that troubled him. This whole situation, it troubled him. He didn’t know what was true – what was the truth. He was lost without anything but a job here to cling on to, lost without memories or experience. Most truths escaped him in that moment, save one:

He was afraid... and that was the truth.

The Lost Fortress of Salazar Slytherin

Darkness was perhaps the one constant here in the foulest place in the entire world. Slytherin's Fortress was hidden within a pocket of time upon the slopes of the mountains in Glencoe above Loch Leven. It had been preserved exactly as it had been one thousand years in the past, and then destroyed in the regular flow of time.

The only entry and exit to the Fortress was a portal stone hidden in plain sight, and that itself was seldom used now that Slytherin's descendant had claimed the fortress for his own.

Beneath the Fortress in both the pocket of time and the present time, hundreds of the world's worst dark creatures waited for the command of their master. They existed in a network of underground caverns and tunnels that stretched far beneath the dirt of Glencoe.

Buried deep within the intricate corridors and winding staircases of the towering spike that was the only above ground feature of the fortress, a single monster worse than all of the others that called that place home paced his dark study, concentrating on his power and plans for domination.

Lord Voldemort, who looked a lot less human since his last encounter with Potter – his skin was whiter, bones more prominent and his eyes constantly burned with a red fire – walked back and forth with murder and revenge on his mind. None of his Death Eaters were currently at the fortress – they were hidden elsewhere or within society, most out recruiting others for his vast army.

And it will be vast, Voldemort vowed, clenching his fists. When he did so, a brief flare of power lit up his cold palms – and it was red. It was red pure magic, and it was growing inside of him.

Texts and ancient tomes littered his desks and the only light came from a few torches blazing on the walls. The closer the Dark Lord drew to them, the dimmer their light became. No matter, he did not need light to see – he was darkness, twisted by the Dark Arts, and could see perfectly in the night.

The books were from Salazar Slytherin's personal collection, and some of them were over three thousand years old – and written in languages

long forgotten, some written only in hieroglyphics. Voldemort mused over one in particular, that spoke of an Army of Darkness pulled from... well, he read his translation of the passage again, picking up the slim piece of parchment which frosted over with ice as he held it. This is what it read:

*Demons from the Beginning...
Sealed for Eternity and barred from Existence
Freed against the Darkslayer once in time,
again by his greatest enemy in another.*

*Commanded by he who frees them, the demons
live in the space between universes – and are
always thirsty for blood.*

*The Darkslayer fought them once, in time,
and would do so again – so says the Prophecy.
All souls will be forfeit in their second coming,
and the Darkslayer will be defeated.*

It was a rough translation, but surprisingly accurate considering the original text was written in a six thousand year old form of hieroglyphics that were almost completely indecipherable.

Lord Voldemort smiled as he read the final paragraph again. With his new power, courtesy of Potter – curse the name – he had the strength to do what this book prophesized. It would take time, and patience – and a lot of sacrifice and magical ingenuity. But it could be done, he was sure. *Had* been done once, although no other reference was made of it.

Whoever this man was, this *Darkslayer*, it had been prophesied he would be defeated, so the Dark Lord did not spend too much time over those lines. All of his enemies would fall... Dumbledore, the Muggles, the Aurors... and, of course, Potter. He would destroy them all!

“I will destroy the world....” he whispered, and his breath was a mist that froze in the air. “I will destroy it, and remake it as I see fit.”

Still though, it would take time. The Dark Lord was not fully recovered from his duel with Potter, and, if the boy still lived, there was their

prophecy to consider. *Either must die at the hand of the other....* It would take time, of that Voldemort could be certain. His smile was grim, insane, and when he clapped his thin skeletal hands together a burst of red sparks surged up and threatened to encase his hands with raw power.

He laughed – Lord Voldemort laughed and the lights in his study flickered out and died. He was something more than a wizard now, he knew, he was closer to a *god*.

I will be a god, he thought, once I've killed them all!

To while away the time before the DA meeting, Ginny practiced her duelling stances in front of a required mirror in the Room of Requirement. She was dressed in her dragon armour and battle robes, as all DA members were at meetings now, and her wand soon became a blur in her hand as she juggled it through the poses and quick draw techniques.

Harry had taught her some of these stances, and she had learnt more since then. Despite her previous reservations about not being sure if she wanted to take on the responsibility of the Defence Association, Ginny's resolve had hardened to something damn near indestructible, and she swore to learn all the defence she could to defend herself, and others, in the coming conflict.

Though it wasn't just enough that she could draw the wand in a heartbeat and point it in any direction before another, she had to be able to use it. Harry had spent most of his waking hours over the last months he was with her at Hogwarts learning curses for war, and Ginny had been practicing in all of hers.

It was one thing to know the curses designed to destroy, it was another thing to actually put them into practice – against another human being. Worry flickered in her brown eyes for a moment, but she shrugged it off. *Of course I can use them, she thought stubbornly. They're Death Eaters... I can curse Death Eaters.*

But could I kill them?

The thought was a dark one... it was a thought she knew had haunted Harry for months, and then plagued him with memories of doing just that. He had become somewhat withdrawn after the war really started, she supposed, and doing this now – training for battle – Ginny could see why.

“He just better get back soon,” she mumbled to herself, sighing in front of the mirror. “We need him... Merlin, we need him more than a million Aurors!”

“You know, dear girl,” an ethereal voice spoke from behind the mirror – startling her. She relaxed a moment later when the Gryffindor house ghost, Nearly-Headless Nick, floated through the glass and shimmered before her. “It is never a good sign when one talks to one’s self.”

Ginny blushed and glanced around the empty room, and then at her watch. The DA meeting wouldn’t start for twenty minutes. “I was just....”

“You miss him,” Nick said, his head swaying to the side. “And that is perfectly understandable. I myself had a soft spot for that boy. Gryffindor courage to his bones, that one, and enough defiance in him to squash the best of us.”

“He’ll be back soon, Sir Nicholas,” Ginny said, silently wishing it true. “He’ll be back.”

Nick nodded and his head fell off to the side. When he fixed it Ginny felt a blast of cold air from his ghostly form. “Of course he will,” Nick went on, “and the atmosphere in this castle will be all the better for it.”

Across the castle, alone in the owlery, Ron and Hermione selected a long-distance postowl from the dozens upon dozens of birds just getting ready for a night’s hunt outside of the castle. It was a large tawny owl, with piercing golden eyes and long hooked talons.

“Now we’ve got an important job for you,” Hermione was saying, stroking his neck feathers. “You’re to deliver a letter to a very powerful wizard, Harry Potter,” she said. “If... when you find him, wait for a reply – we’ll also be slipping this ring around your foot, it won’t hurt.”

Ron watched in silence for a moment before speaking, working up the courage to share his concerns. "You gotta wonder why, if Harry is alive somewhere, he hasn't come back," Ron said, voicing both of their concerns. It was a very awkward silence that followed.

Hermione shuddered and wrapped her cloak closer around herself, as Ron tied the small letter to the bird's leg, slipping the tracking ring over the other. He shrunk it once he was done, and it fit snugly on the owl's outstretched leg.

"I think... maybe he can't come back," Hermione said. "He would, Ron, if he could – but anything could have happened in the last month, absolutely anything. He could be healing from that stab wound in a Muggle hospital as far away as Australia for all we know! The owl will find him."

The owl hooted and nodded in agreement.

Ron didn't nod, just shrugged, and set the owl out into the night off his own arm. "Cross our fingers now, I suppose," he mumbled. "I hope that owl doesn't bring that letter back."

"He's alive, Ron," Hermione practically growled, screaming defiance at anyone who suggested otherwise. "He's alive."

Ron did nod this time, but it was uncertain. "We've got to get to the DA meeting," he said, tensing his wrist and feeling his wand in its holster. "Moody's coming to give the group a talk about being an Auror – and what it means to fight Death Eaters. We better make sure he doesn't scare them all away."

April 30th

Harry stretched his tired limbs and stumbled into his room, the guest room, on the second floor of the Jordan home. He had just gotten out of the shower and his long shaggy hair was still dripping wet. He wore a pair of boxer shorts only, and his scarred body was visible for the whole world to see.

If there had been a world.

His bed was practically screaming to him and Harry was happy to oblige, tossing his clothes onto the floor near a box of all his possessions. That amounted to a few clean shirts and shorts, socks and shoes, and a few towels. Not much, not counting his toiletries, but he wasn't bothered by it. There was also the golden earring he wore in his ear, but that was strange in itself. It was a griffin, a mythical beast.

His head ached with what he supposed must have been too much sun today, out and around them farm. At least he hoped that was the reason, although he was very eager to remember anything he could, he was too tired to care much now.

Setting the alarm clock on the bedside table for seven the next morning, Harry rolled over onto the bed with a sigh. The night was too hot to get under the covers, and he gazed through the window at the long splattering of stars that made up the universe. His eyes blurred as he stared at the half moon, and if anything his headache seemed to intensify.

I wonder if Katharine's asleep yet, he thought, she's probably got some painkillers.

Harry dismissed the thought. He was extremely thankful to the Jordans for allowing him to stay here, and they had made him feel welcome, but something held him back. He thought that maybe it was because he wanted, more than anything else, to remember – and that the headache was a sign that he may be doing so. Or it could just be a headache....

There are so many stars, he thought, drifting slowly towards sleep. I wonder if there are other worlds out there, in the universe? That would be amazing....

Harry put his hands behind his head and turned from the window, snuggling into his pillow and allowing himself to drift to sleep. It had been a long day, with many odd occurrences that seemed to follow him around. He wasn't normal, he suspected, but he couldn't imagine what he was.

There were the odd flashes of... memory... maybe. They were too weird, too wrong to be real, so they couldn't be memories. He had a flash earlier today, whilst cleaning out the stables, of running a horse to death while being chased by a horde of rampaging creatures that were hideous. He couldn't describe them any better than that.

Not real, couldn't be – *such things do not exist!*

He fell asleep frowning.

“Such things do not exist, Harry?” a voice whispered from all around.

Harry stood in a room, completely white and empty as far as he could see. He stood on the ground, but he couldn't see any walls. It was just white, white for eternity. The voice was everywhere and nowhere.

“Be prepared, young Darkslayer, be prepared. Soon you'll know that even the worst of nightmares are real.”

“Who are you?” Harry whispered, glaring at the whiteness.

There was laughter. “You should find out who you are, before asking who I am. Time is coming, and it will end. You will have no part in this one, Darkslayer – the Destroyers will not allow it.”

“De.. destroyers?”

Laughter again, and a sharp sound like the splitting of stone. He thought he saw the floor bleeding for an instant, but it was whole and white in the next. “Wake up, Darkslayer,” the voice said. It sounded almost mocking. “Wake up and face tomorrow.”

Harry awoke with a start and found he was drenched in sweat and that his forehead blazed with pain.

“HARRY! Wake up,” a voice roared..

“I'm awake...” he mumbled, grasping his forehead. “Was'a'matter, Matt?”

“The barn is on fire, come on, I need you to work a hose.”

Harry was up in a flash, still dressed in only his boxer shorts he followed

Matt down through the house which was almost too silent. Matt was hardly dressed better, in a blue bathrobe, but haste was needed at the moment. Perhaps if he had known he wasn't coming back, Harry might have put on some jeans or shorts at least.

They practically jumped down the stairs three at a time, and outside Harry could hear animals. The dogs were barking, horses whinnying. There were also human shouts, as he and Matt ran out of the open door....

and into a furnace.

A wave of heat so hot that Harry felt his throat grow dry washed over the two of them as they took in the scene before them with eyes widening in horror. About fifty metres away from the house, the big two storey wooden barn was ablaze with green flames of such size and intensity, that Jack and Ben on the water wagon could not get closer than twenty metres. At full pressure, the water hose barely reached the barn's base.

"Christ almighty!" Matt exclaimed, shying away from the unnatural flames. "What the hell can do this!? JACK, BEN, ABANDON IT! GET OUT OF THERE!"

Harry was close behind him when the large propane gas tank on the side of the barn exploded, and the four men were thrown backwards along with several pounds of dirt and debris. Harry heard a scream and looked to his right to see a piece of corrugated iron, twisted and jagged, embedded in Ben's forearm.

Katharine, Jason, and Melissa were standing on the porch with equal looks of horror and disbelief, and at the explosion Jason ran forward, his mother and sister following almost instantly, to pull the four of them away. Harry was on his feet in a flash and worked his arms underneath Matt's to pull the man away from the hot flames and burning fountain of gas that had once been the fuel deposit.

As Harry dragged an unconscious Matt back, a rather nasty amount of blood soaking his face, he felt a... *pulling*... in his stomach. There was no other way to describe it. And for some unknown reason he had the urge to turn around and look... up. Almost without realising it, he did.

There – in the moonlight – there were figures on the high roof of the Jordan's home, silhouetted clearly against the moon. Harry blinked, not exactly sure what he was seeing. Three of them, just standing there. No one else had noticed them, so concerned they were about the barn and the poor animals that were in there, but Harry could *feel* them.

He was about to raise a cry, but then the impossible happened. As one, as if sensing his gaze, the people on the roof seemed to double in size... and sprout wings.

Monsters, Harry thought, and his mind stabbed him with pain. *Vampires...*

With a screech that only Harry heard, the creatures jumped off the roof of the house and disappeared into the darkness of the night. Harry watched them go, knees and hands shaking, unwilling to believe what he had seen.

They were here... because of me, he thought, unconsciously clenching his hands into fists. If anyone had been looking at his face at that moment, including Harry himself, they would have been wise to take a cautious step back. His eyes hardened into two chips of green emerald, and his mouth was set in a grim line. It seemed, for one moment, that the very air reverberated with power.

"The fire-fighters and ambulance are on the way," Melissa breathed to his left, coughing through the growing amount of acrid smoke. She was crying. "They'll be at least twenty minutes though, coming all the way from town...."

Harry nodded. "Jack, lift Ben into the back of the Ute – no questions just do it – Jason, go get me the keys. We'll meet them halfway. Melissa, get on the phone again and tell the ambulance to look out for a Holden Ute."

Showing a surprising amount of strength, Harry ran over to Katharine who was holding the unconscious Matt, his head in her lap. Without saying anything, he knelt down and scooped up the bigger man, not at all feeling his weight. Swinging around, Harry ran over to the white Ute that stood in the darkness beside the house.

Jack was already there; helping a pale faced Ben up onto the back, and then climbed up himself. Harry dumped Matt on the back as well, before securing the tail door. "Make sure he doesn't fall off," he told Jack, and then turned again gracefully, as if all of this had been perfectly choreographed, to catch the keys as Jason threw them through the air.

"I'm coming," the young man said, and jumped up onto the back of the Ute next to his dad and Ben. "Let's go, Harry."

Harry didn't need telling twice. He threw open the driver's side door and slid into the seat, keying the ignition and practically ripped the gearbox apart putting it into Reverse. The smoke was thick as he sped out of the driveway and the heat of the flames intense. He left the driveway to avoid it and swerved across the grass, which was beginning to burn with those weird green flames as well.

He turned back onto the road after they had passed the barn, and Harry pushed the accelerator to the floor, gunning it up to fifth in a matter of seconds. The road, he knew, although it was illegal for him to drive on, was practically as straight as a ruler all the way into town. If Melissa was right about the ambulance time, they would meet them in about fifteen minutes, halfway down the road.

The night was dark and Harry flicked on the headlights to high beam, as the farm land washed by in darkness on either side. The speed limit was a hundred and ten out on the open country road, but Harry pushed it to one twenty – feeling completely calm and in control. He glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw Jack and Jason hunched down holding Ben and Matt. They would manage.

Having a few moments to think now, blaring down the road in Fifth, Harry frowned at what he had seen this night. Green flames... creatures his mind told him were vampires on the roof of the house. *Just who in the hell am I?* he asked himself, not for the first time. Again, there was that brief feeling of... power... in the air.

Without a doubt, he knew he was responsible for bringing this down upon Matt and his family. He was dangerous, he wasn't normal, he should leave. The white dividing line in the road sped by in the glow of his headlights, and Harry glared ahead into the night searching for any

flashing lights, although he knew it was too soon.

Suddenly, and unexpectedly, several things happened at once. There was a scream, a large thump on the roof and the Ute jerked several feet to the side. Harry swore, easing his foot on the brake and looking back onto the loading space of the Ute, his eyes widening in fear, just as a long, foul smelling... *claw* ripped through the roof of his cabin, tearing for his throat.

Harry swore loudly again, the car swerving across the road in wide arcs. There was something on the roof trying to kill him, and he had to keep it steady or else he'd kill them all. He slammed on the brake and washed off the rest of his speed in a long, black skid mark along the road. He was thrown forward and hit his head on the windshield, seeing stars but having the mind to open the door and fall out onto the road – escaping the clawed hand.

The road was warm beneath him, even as he skirted backwards on his hands away from the car and the creatures upon it. Three of them, one on the roof and two others advancing on the helpless people in the back. Jason was standing now, with wide eyes and a single piece of wood in his hand, swinging it like a club. Matt was still unconscious and out of sight, but Jack was standing guard in front of Ben, who was sitting up and grimacing against the metal tail door.

The creatures were hideous, and out of one of his nightmares.

“Be prepared, young Darkslayer, be prepared. Soon you’ll know that even the worst of nightmares are real.”

As one, the three creatures that Harry knew could not be real, turned and jumped off the Ute towards him, their hooked feet scratching on the tar of the road. They shrieked, and it was terrible – inhuman – beyond imagination. Something inside of Harry responded to that shriek, as if he knew it all too well, and he rose with a grim look of determination on his face.

His head was cut and bruised just above his left eye from where he had hit it on the windscreen, but he didn't feel it. Everything seemed so much more real now, and even though he was terrified beyond belief, he also

felt a small measure of anger. Whoever or whatever these monsters were they had no right to kill and maim, to destroy and end.

Harry couldn't be sure, but as he stood defiantly before the three winged vampires, he thought he saw uncertainty flash between them.

"What the hell is going on!?" he growled, raising his fists before him. He didn't care that he was still only dressed in boxer shorts.

The vampire nearest to him bared its fangs, it was a male, as far as Harry could tell, and rippling with muscle. Its wings sheared the night behind him, and with a wave of its hand the three creatures advanced on Harry.

"Darkslayer," one of them hissed. "Why did we fear you?"

Harry found himself taking large steps backwards whilst keeping his eyes on the monsters. He didn't know what he was doing, or why this was happening, or what he was going to do, but eventually he ran out of road and was left only with a long, empty desert plain behind him that he would be easily picked out on. In the distance, as sound carried well in the empty night, he thought he could hear sirens.

Good, he thought. I just have to keep them from Jason and the others long enough for someone to arrive... anyone.

The vampires had also heard the sirens. "We take him now, Khaltar," the smallest of the three said, a female with grey skin and large wings. In her sharp-clawed hands she carried what looked like chains, with loops on the end.

Harry gasped – they were shackles, for him. They wanted to take him hostage? No time to think, they were upon him. Too frightened to do anything, Harry shuddered as the large vampire – Khaltar – wrapped his hand around his throat and began to squeeze. The female brought the shackles forward and they shone faintly purple as she moved.

It was then, when it seemed he had lost, that something inside of Harry roared – something powerful, something that was part of him, *who he was*. A great presence, the power of a great man, who knew war and battle better than any other human in Existence. That was all he thought

before, grabbing the arm holding his throat, Harry twisted and applied pressure in just the right place – snapping the bone clean in half.

Khaltar screamed – screamed and shrieked – dropping Harry to his feet. Eyes dark, Harry advanced on the creatures, swinging his hands left and right, kicking and dealing damage in a way he didn't think he should know. He was graceful, elegant, diving in between the creatures that had become a flurry of shrieks and grasping limbs.

He drove a raised knuckle into the hard knotted flesh of the other male vampire and it felt as though he had punched a brick wall, but the creature went down, gasping and wheezing. He kicked it in the face with the sole of his foot, feeling the monster's nose crack like he knew it would.

WHAT AM I? his mind roared. *Darkslayer*, came the answer.

It all became a blur as he began to grow tired. He dove and punched, struck and defended. He had battered the monsters enough to kill any normal man, but these were dark creatures and their strength surpassed any mortals. Shaking with fear and fury, Harry pummelled Khaltar's chest, his knuckles bruised and bleeding.

He turned as the female shrieked, and was unconscious a second later when several pounds of metal chains hit him across the face. His mind was on fire, as was that scar on his forehead – yes, he believed it was the scar – and the last thing he saw before light faded were the stars glowing softly overhead....

A sprinkling of diamond dust that were the heavens.

May 2nd

"I think... I think we can do this," Hermione said. "But we'll need help."

Ron, Hermione and Ginny were seated behind a large pile of books at one of the more secluded tables in the school library. Hermione sat in between Ron and Ginny, scratching idly at a piece of parchment with a dry quill. Ginny was frowning at the book she was reading, and Ron sat

twiddling his thumbs.

Ron nodded and glanced down at the Marauder's Map on his lap. It currently showed who was in the library and where they were. Madam Pince, the librarian, was at her desk, there was a group of third years studying across the library, and Professor Sinistra was standing before the archives on the second floor. Ron lifted the map up onto the table.

"As long as we don't have to ask Snape for help," Ron said.

Hermione shrugged. "We'll have to, we need the potion ingredients – but as long as Dumbledore approves then Professor Snape can't stop us."

"The man's a git, I'm sure he'll try," Ron said dryly, and Ginny giggled. "He doesn't like what we're doing with the DA, and he'll probably give me detention just for asking him for the ingredients."

Hermione shared a small smile with Ginny. "I'll ask him if you're scared," she said, and Ginny laughed as Ron turned red.

"I'm not—"

"Of course you're not," Hermione said calmly, tickling his chin with the end of the feathered quill. "But Dumbledore will step in and we won't have to worry about Snape being... well... Snape."

Ron shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "I'm not sure it's worth it," he grumbled, flicking the map with his fingers. "What else will we need?"

"Not much," Hermione sat up straighter and began to write quickly on the bare parchment before her. "Time, mostly. The ink will take at least two weeks to make, and then there's the map itself. I'm not sure how long it took Sirius and the others to make, we should ask Professor Lup—Remus, but it will be worth it in the end."

"Just think about it, Ron," Ginny said eagerly. "We can make copies of the Marauder's Map for the DA, and we can also make new maps for other places, like Diagon Alley or the Ministry."

"Not sure Dad would approve of that," Ron replied, scratching the growth of stubble on the side of his face. "You'd think the Ministry would have

something like the Marauder's Map anyway," he finished.

"It may have, but if it doesn't we can give it to your dad," Hermione said. "It'll help the war effort, at least."

Ron nodded. "Tell me what needs doing then, and I'll do it. Even if it means asking Snape for a favour."

Hermione smiled. "We'll approach Headmaster Dumbledore first and see what he thinks. We need more maps for Hogwarts anyway, but it would be incredibly useful to be able to monitor Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade as well."

"Okay...." Ron agreed. "What next? I'm about ready to fall asleep right here."

Hermione put her hand over his. "We'll start tomorrow," she said.

Ron awoke the next morning just before seven and slowly pulled himself out of bed and headed for the showers across the corridor. Under the spray of the shower. He recalled the strange dreams of the previous night with a startling clarity that he usually didn't possess. In fact, it was rare if he remembered any dream – let alone this one.

It was about Harry, of course – who else?

It was Harry, bruised and battered in chains and shut inside a dark... box. His eyes had looked frightened but at times they had seemed to harden to something beyond power. It had been frightening, and it had been the same dream throughout the entire night. He had woken up more than once. It had been terrible – sometimes he thought he could hear Harry's screams, see through his eyes, feel his pain.

Drying off, Ron put on his clothes for the day and headed down to the common room, feeling very hungry. The nightmares of the previous night had sapped all of his strength. It was early yet on Saturday morning, and most people would not be up for another hour or two. There were a few people in the common room, but what surprised and shocked Ron the most was that Hermione and Ginny were sitting together in one of the armchairs, and Ginny was crying into Hermione's shoulder. Hermione herself seemed to be fighting back tears – she looked

confused... and... and *scared*.

"What's the matter?" Ron asked quickly, sitting down opposite them and frowning. "What's happened?"

Hermione's voice shook when she spoke. "Nightmares...." she whispered, and Ron froze. "We... we had *terrible* nightmares ab- about Harry...."

Ron felt his mouth go dry and he worked it up and down a few times. "I did as well...." he choked, sitting back in the chair as both Hermione and Ginny turned to look at him. "In chains...." he continued, and they nodded. "Kept prisoner in like... like a *coffin*?"

"That's it...." Ginny breathed. "Oh, Ron, what if it's real?"

"It was a dream," he said too quickly, but he didn't believe it. "Just.... just a nightmare."

"It was real," Hermione said, and Ron saw she was clutching a small black object in her left hand. It was the receiver to the tracking device on the owl they had sent out. "And this says Harry is somewhere to the south." The stone shone dark blue, which was the agreed upon colour for south.

"He's alive," Ginny whispered, squeezing her hands together, balling them into fists. She angrily swatted away the tears on her face, and sat up straight in her chair. "He's alive and being tortured. We have to do something!" The last came out as a shout, and more than one face glanced over from around the common room in concern.

"We do," Ron agreed, assuming command. "We tell Dumbledore everything we know, and tell him Harry needs to be found today – now. If he can't do it... then we'll do it ourselves. I mean we've got all the money we need, thanks to Harry. We'll buy Portkeys south, follow the owl."

"That's crazy, Ron," Hermione muttered.

"Is it?" he asked, a wild light in his eyes. "I think it is exactly what Harry would have done, if it was one of us out there."

“No doubt,” Ginny agreed with a small smile. “But we’re not Harry. Before we decide on anything we have to see Dumbledore. You wait whilst Hermione and I go get changed, Ron. Five minutes.”

As one, the two of them bounded up the stairs to the girl’s dormitories and that left Ron alone with his thoughts for a few minutes, and the anger he felt. It wasn’t right that anyone anywhere could do this to Harry – not Harry. *Hasn’t he been through enough?* he asked.

“You alright, Ron?” Neville asked, coming to sit down next to him. His hair was still damp from the showers and he looked a little tired.

“You have any nightmares last night, Nev?” Ron asked wearily, rubbing his eyes.

Neville frowned. “No, why? Did you?”

Ron just nodded. “Never mind, just thinking out loud, I guess.”

There were rushing footsteps on the stairs behind him and Ron turned in time to see Hermione and Ginny emerge dressed in their school uniforms. “Right then” he said. “See you later, Nev.”

Hermione and Ginny didn’t pause on their walk through the common room and Ron fell in line beside Hermione. “Nothing to worry about,” he called to Neville over his shoulder, and the three of them exited the common room – heading straight for Dumbledore’s office.

It was getting to be about time for breakfast in the Great Hall, but on weekends it wasn’t a constant thing, so Ron hoped that Dumbledore would be in his office and not down in the Hall. They walked quickly, speaking little, and before they knew it stood before the gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore’s study.

“Skiving Snackbox,” Ginny said clearly, and was first onto the rising stairs. Hermione followed, and Ron came up last.

“What’re we going to say to him, Hermione?” he asked quietly as they rose. He had never been sure if Dumbledore could see and hear what happened outside of his office.

“We’ll just tell him about the owl, and about the nightmares,” she said, although she sounded nervous. “All three of us had it, Ron, that’s got to mean and count for something.”

The wooden doors were wide open at the top of the stairs and Albus Dumbledore looked up from behind his desk at the sound of new arrivals. He smiled warmly when he saw who it was, and motioned them in with a,

“Good morning, Mr and Miss Weasley, and Miss Granger, of course. What can I do for you today?”

No sooner had he said it than Dumbledore’s cheerful mood vanished, as he saw the pain etched on the three young faces before him. Fawkes sensed something of it to, as the young phoenix – recently risen from the ashes – began to sing softly.

“It’s Harry, Professor,” Hermione began as steadily as he could. “We think he may be in trouble.”

“We know he’s in trouble,” Ron growled, and then seemed surprised that he had done so.

Dumbledore stood and was silent for a moment, but then nodded for them to continue. Unexpectedly, it was Ginny who spoke of the shared nightmare. The way she described it though... it was as if they were reliving it again – sights, sounds, smells and feelings. Ron realised, that for some reason, Ginny’s nightmare had been more real than his.

Dumbledore’s face darkened with every word, and Ron could see the anger there, as well as the suffering in his old eyes, which held no twinkle. His eyes widened when Ginny said they had all shared the same... *vision*, he supposed, and it was a long minute before he spoke.

“I believe you,” he said, and his voice shook with power. “What you’ve described though, it still leaves us with nowhere to search. Merlin,” the Headmaster cursed, “I will not fail him again!”

Ron unconsciously took a step back at the rage he felt in Dumbledore, but found that he himself held the same anger – and it drove him on. “We sent out a postowl,” he began, “with a letter to Harry, and a magical beacon.”

Hermione produced the glowing blue stone and placed it on Dumbledore's desk. "Blue means south," she said, even as the stone flickered to a lighter shade of the colour. "Southwest."

"Ingenious," Dumbledore whispered, and then to himself, "I truly did not believe he could be found upon this world...."

"What?" Ginny asked.

"I've made many mistakes, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore replied, as if that cleared it all up. "But no more. How long since you sent the owl?"

"Seven days this evening," Hermione offered quickly. "We used a long distance owl, so it could be as far as southern France by now."

Dumbledore nodded and Ron could see him making plans, calculations, forming strategies behind his eyes. "Professor," Ginny whispered. "Have you any idea why we shared the same nightmare?"

Hermione and Ron looked up expectantly at Dumbledore. Well, Hermione looked up – Ron was passed the old man's shoulders. They both wanted to know why....

"I truly cannot say," Dumbledore replied, after giving it a moments thought. "We have been using magic for millennia, us humans, and I believe that we have barely scratched the surface of the potential inside of such a force. Harry, on the other hand...."

"Harry plays by his own rules," Ron finished, and after a moment Dumbledore smiled and nodded.

"Yes... indeed he does," the Headmaster replied. "Now, I must floo to the Ministry immediately. The search for Harry needs to be renewed – and narrowed. Thank you, you three. You have done more for Harry than I have."

Chapter 3 – Fantasy is Reality

Pandemonium did not reign; it poured.

~~John Hendrick Bangs

“Incredible,” Remus Lupin muttered, holding the glowing stone in his hand that was tracking the progress of an owl heading towards Harry. “Albus, we should seriously consider inducting those three into the Order.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Such simplicity,” he said. “Hundreds of thousands of galleons spent on a worldwide coordinated search, and Hermione Granger does it faster and better than all of us for nothing.”

“She’s too young to be in the Order,” Molly Weasley said warningly. “And I’ll not have my Ginny and Ron in it yet either – if ever.”

There was a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix at their headquarters in London. Grimmauld Place. Twelve members sat around the ornate wooden table in the meeting room, sealed away from the world. Dumbledore, Remus, and Molly Weasley, Fred and George Weasley as well as Severus Snape (both he and Dumbledore visiting the Ministry) Tonks and Kingsley, Dedalus Diggle and Hestia Jones. Mundungus Fletcher sat in a cloud of his own smoke, and two seats away from him was Elphias Doge.

“They’re fighting this war whether you want them to or not, mum,” George Weasley said, stroking the small beard he had been growing on his chin. He quickly turned red and said no more under his mother’s glare.

“The young see things differently than the old,” Dumbledore continued, staring at a spot on the table. “I want to arrange a twenty four observation of the tracking stone,” he continued. “Miss Granger informed me it will glow deep red upon reaching the owl’s destination. That is, when the letter is removed from its leg.”

"It can be used as an Apparation beacon," Remus continued. "We can zone in on the signal, and Apparate straight to Harry!"

"With nothing less than a task force of two dozen Aurors," Dumbledore finished, glancing at Kingsley. "I have reason to believe that Harry is... being held prisoner."

"WHAT!?" Molly Weasley exploded, and several cries of shock rose from the other members around the table. "Albus... what... how?"

"Ron, Hermione, and Ginny," the old Headmaster began, "have been having nightmares the last few nights... all the same, and all of Harry shackled and trapped inside of a dark room."

Molly gasped.

"Surely you cannot credit mere dreams, Albus," Severus Snape scoffed, resting his chin in his hand.

"They are real, Severus, and are not mere dreams. Ron Weasley awoke this morning with a black eye. He dreamt that Harry was beaten, and knocked unconscious with a blow to the face."

"Dear Merlin," Fred and George Weasley whispered, and Molly seemed close to tears. "What can we do?"

"We find Harry as soon as possible," Dumbledore said. "I cannot begin to imagine what is causing these dreams, or why Ron is feeling Harry's pain – but it is happening, and we have to act now."

"I'll put the Aurors we can trust on alert," Kingsley said. "Dermas Trask has been given the rank of commander, by the way. He rose fast through the training program."

Dumbledore nodded. He would file that away. Perhaps one day Dermas would become a member of the Order, like his fiancé had been before....

he sighed. "See that it is done, Kingsley. I fear we are trying to balance scales, and Harry is the weight that will tip us either into the abyss or into light."

It was dark in the box they kept him in, and even though the pain was beyond belief, the terrors unimaginable, it was the darkness that frightened him the most.

Harry's hands were shackled behind his back and to his ankles. He had discovered, after a few hours bent almost double inside of this small box that the harder he pulled against the chains, the tighter they became. He had tried to make himself go limp – slack after that, but occasionally his cramped muscles twitched and the shackles cut into his skin. He knew his wrists and ankles were bleeding, but he couldn't care.

Once a day the box opened, and it was always at night. He hadn't seen the sun in years, it seemed. He was allowed out still shackled to eat and drink, and relieve himself. There were always seven creatures poised to kill him if he didn't do exactly as ordered though, and they hurt him anyway.

Just for kicks, he thought, laughing insanely as he remembered the beatings and the agony of waking up in the box bruised and battered, night after endless night. He had long since run out of tears for whatever was happening, and why. The pain had lessened somewhat over the days as well, and now felt like an old friend.

The vampires still did their best to hurt him, but it was as if he had grown numb to it all. He was lost, alone, within a reality that couldn't be real, and he had no idea why this should be. His memory was as blank as the day he had awoken on the beach.

How long ago had that been? he wondered. *I hope the Jordans are okay....*

A constant and maddening pain tore up his back every hour of the day, and only lessened when he was allowed to stand for about ten minutes at night. It seemed, even though the creatures hated him with a passion, that he was to be kept alive.

“Alive....” he croaked, feeling the shackles biting into his wrist and shins. His legs were bent up around his back, and he tried not to think on it. There was too much pain. “Still... alive.”

He was, he knew – and it was this thought that hardened his resolve into steel. One day he would make them all pay, even if it killed him. Thinking back to the night he was captured, it seemed so long ago, Harry recalled the feeling of power that had surged through him.

It was as if he had been someone else in those furious few moments before he was knocked unconscious. And he knew, for a few seconds at least, that he had been who he was before the memory loss. That, even beyond the creatures that tortured him nightly, frightened him through to his very soul.

For those few moments in the fight, he had felt totally and utterly confident that he could do *anything*. Absolutely anything.

Tear apart the planet if needs be.

The chest shook and he winced against the cuffs, not knowing where the vampires were taking him didn't matter. He'd escape, he would, and they would pay.

I'm not a pawn, he thought, and it was another of those odd thoughts that seemed to have nothing to do with anything. After that, he closed his eyes and concentrated on nothingness, making himself forget that he was living a life without hope.

When Harry opened his eyes again it was still dark, still cold, but there were stars once again overhead. He lay on cool, damp ground and for the first time in days fully stretched his numb, painful limbs that

screamed in pain as he moved. He still wore the shackles, he knew, but they were locked in front of him now instead of behind.

Something struck him hard in the ribs and he exploded into a coughing fit. "Move again," a dark voice hissed. "And I will gouge out your left eye, and feed it to you."

Harry went slack, not daring to even blink.

"Good, boy." It was Khaltar, the large male vampire. "You show obedience and you may yet live one more day."

Harry coughed; he couldn't help it, "Where... where are you taking me?"

Khaltar laughed and he heard others around this dark grove laughing as well. Harry turned his head to the left and saw three vampires with their fangs buried deep into the throat of a body wearing a black dinner suit. Another two human corpses lay to the right, a woman and child.

"To Hell, Darkslayer," Khaltar hissed. "You will beg for your life before the Lord Masorn."

Something defiant surged up in Harry at their mocking laughter, and complete disregard for human life. These creatures should not exist. "Friendly chap then, this Lord Masorn?"

Khaltar hissed and Harry took another shot in the ribs. "Bite your tongue or lose it, human."

Harry did as he was told, although his glare spoke for him more than words ever could. He was fed stale bread and cold water, before being shoved back into the small crate again, cramped and leaning forward until his face almost touched his shin. He did bite his tongue then, to stop the screams and pain – he would not let them see or hear that, something inside of him roared against such a thing.

It was who he was, he knew, and it was getting stronger. Despite his

current circumstances he felt that soon, very soon, these creatures were going to be beyond sorry. He laughed then, but didn't hear it.

"The potion will take two and a half weeks to stew, over the full moon," Hermione said, quoting straight from her mind. "I asked Remus about it two days ago and he wrote down what he could remember."

In one of the many spare classrooms around Hogwarts castle, this one on the third floor and covered in so much dust it was clear that it hadn't been used in decades – if ever – Hermione sat around a bubbling cauldron that she was stirring periodically whilst adding vital ingredients to the mixture that would, once complete, be used to draw new maps with the qualities similar to that of the Marauder's Map.

"How did Snape take to you having free reign in the potion stores?" Ron asked with barely concealed glee.

Hermione coloured. "Well... he didn't.... he didn't take to it with a smile," she mumbled. Ron burst out laughing and she glared.

Ginny sat with crossed legs next to Hermione and a bubbling cauldron of her own steaming in front of her. She hesitated in stirring it, an irritated look upon her face. "I should pass my potions OWL for doing this," she growled. "This is beyond NEWT level!"

"Stir it counter clockwise half a dozen more times and then add the quill ink," Hermione said calmly, having been watching Ginny out of the corner of her eye. "You're getting there."

"It'll be good practice for your OWLs next month," Ron added, and Ginny scowled at him.

"Harry probably wouldn't do too well on his exams," Ginny muttered a few moments later, pouring in some ink to the slimy concoction. "He missed so much of this year."

Hermione and Ron nodded, staring glumly at the floor. "He'd do well in Defence, at least," Hermione said pensively. "Unfortunately...."

Ron cleared his throat. "How long does this potion have to sit?"

"Hmm...? Oh, a fortnight or so – give us a chance to draw the outlines of the new maps, get the blueprints for Diagon Alley and whatnot. Remember to ask your dad about that, Ron."

Ron nodded. "I will – I'll send him an owl tonight."

"Have you heard anything about the letter you sent to Harry?" Ginny asked quietly, unable to avoid the question. It seemed that no matter what they did, it always came back to Harry. It was simply unavoidable.

"Last night Remus said that it was to the southeast," Hermione sighed. "And heading further east. If... he's.... He is somewhere on the Continent, I think."

"Europe's a big continent...." Ginny mumbled. "And then there's everything that isn't Europe to the east."

"We'll find him," Ron said, sounding a lot more confident than he felt. "It won't be long now. He's on the move, if the owl keeps changing direction – so that must mean he's alive. Merlin knows what he's doing though...."

"Riding out the summer on a tropical beach somewhere," Hermione said. "Having a rest before he comes back."

Of course he wasn't – they all had the dreams, the nightmares, and Ron still had a bruise or two from them. His eye was black and refused magical healing, as were his ribs. It was getting worse as well. Every night now they all shared the same dream. Harry – standing in shadow surrounded by unseen creatures that struck him again and again. Harry shackled and chained, drifting in and out of consciousness. Harry looking lost, with two swords hanging above his head.

“He’s in trouble,” Ron said, and he fully believed it. “I’ve no idea why or how, but something isn’t right – something’s wrong – and I don’t think Harry can get out of this one on his own.”

Ginny clenched her fists and shuddered. “He may have to....”

The Carpathian Mountains
Midnight

It was dark in the box, it was always dark. But today it seemed darker, the pain more fresh and sharp. The shackles cut mercilessly into his wrists and ankles and he was cold, a battered bruised body felt that cold – and every breath he drew made him want to die.

Wherever he was the air was rancid, old and stale. He was moving, he could feel the small crate he was kept in moving, swaying through the air. That was all he felt besides the pain. He had long since given up any chance of rescue from anyone or even *anything*, given up hope of figuring out why this was happening....

Darkslayer, the word whispered through his mind and shook the pillars of his consciousness. *They think I’m something called the Darkslayer. Perhaps I am? I can’t say I’m not....*

It was cold.

He was still only wearing the grey boxer shorts he had been abducted in, that and the shackles. All his other clothes were presumably still in the room he had been given back in that farmhouse – *the Jordans, yes the Jordans* – if the house hadn’t burnt to the ground. He wondered if they were still alive, he hoped they were, but knew he would never see them again.

And then there were the dreams – dreams that could have been

memories if they weren't so extraordinary, even compared to what was happening to him now. He had dreams, that could have been nightmares, of flying through the air on a – a broom, and outrunning what could very well have been the apocalypse.

There was also a girl with auburn hair smiling at him from underneath an azure twilight sky, another girl with bushy brown hair – her arms around a tall boy with red hair. Just the same memory, under that twilight sky, and that was all he had.

He couldn't remember if he preferred tea or coffee anymore, and now it didn't matter.

It hurt to blink, it hurt to breathe. His joints burnt with the fire of the sun and he knew he was dying. He had lost weight in the days that seemed like years since he had been captured and his flame was slowly burning out. Still, a small spark remained – a small, undeniable spark that had the strength to scour the heavens.

Defiance, Harry thought, it is my defiance – and I will never lose it. Never, until the last breath, the last drop of blood.

Now where had that thought come from?

That was another thing he did to take his mind off the pain, which was the only constant in his life now. He remembered everything he could, to replace the holes in his head. He sometimes thought and said odd things, but had no other memories for these sayings and ways of thought. It was just who he was, and what he said.

But what normal person would defy Death itself, if it came to that? Why was he willing and unafraid of the prospect of fighting the creatures that held him captive? Who, in the world – *in all worlds* – was he?

All worlds, he thought then. Why did I say all worlds!?

He wanted to scream, but all that came out of his mouth was a low

crackling sound. It was then that his coffin was thrown roughly to the ground, the lid fell open and he tumbled out onto cold damp stone, coughing and wheezing. Raising himself to his knees using his weak arms, Harry straightened as much as he could with the slack afforded by the chains.

“Good evening, Darkslayer.”

It was night – night somewhere high above the earth. Harry looked out of a nearby window and saw the night sky, speckled with the dust of diamonds and below the moonlight lit up a mountainside that disappeared into darkness. Before him though, sitting on a seat of bone, a hideous creature smiled – victory flashing in its eyes.

Harry knew he should have been scared – terrified – but that old familiar and yet completely foreign feeling was bubbling inside of him. The defiance, the will to... resist. These creatures were beneath him, had no right to existence – not if they slaughtered the innocent for no other reason than it brought them simple pleasure. He wasn't afraid, a part of him wasn't afraid anyway. And it was this part he drew his strength from.

“Where am I?” he asked calmly, if a little throatily, staring at what was obviously the authority figure amongst these creatures. It was a vampire, he knew, sitting on that throne of skulls. One that was riddled with grey flesh, covered in dried blood and stinking of decay. Folded black wings rose from its shoulder blades, and the monster's eyes were yellow, bloodshot red until the whites disappeared.

“You are my guest,” the vampire replied, and Harry looked over his shoulder to see another seven or so creatures kneeling before this other one. There was Khaltar, snarling at him, and the other six that had captured him. He swallowed fear, and turned back to the head vampire. “I am Lord Masorn, sworn overlord of the Vampiric Empire... do you have a name, young Darkslayer?”

“Harry,” Harry said, pulling on his shackles. “As far as I know, it's Harry,” he finished with a shrug. He also suppressed a shiver, not wanting to

show weakness. It was cold and he was barely dressed.

Masorn rose what was left of his left eyebrow, and his pale grey forehead titled down into a frown. He was glaring at him now, and Harry returned that glare. "Khaltar...." Masorn began, but hesitated. Clenching his fist, he continued, "Khaltar, lift his fringe...."

Grunting, Khaltar did as ordered, and very nearly pulled Harry's hair out as he lifted the black fringe covering his forehead. Harry saw and heard Masorn gasp when he did.

"Harry Potter...." he hissed.

Khaltar grunted again and drew one of his claws across Harry's throat, breaking the skin just beneath his ear. "Can I kill him, my lord? He has caused me much pain...."

Masorn rose and walked down the bone steps towards Harry. They kept their eyes on one another and neither would blink. Harry thought he might gag from the stench, but he kept his face straight and defiant – inside he was a wreck of nerves.

"You will...." Masorn motioned to Khaltar, "not kill him." Harry noticed he never said anything about harming him. "He is Harry Potter... the Boy Who Lived and the Darkslayer... our bargaining chip with the Dark Lord for greater power when he renews his war against the wizarding world."

Despite the cold and the pain and the fear, Harry tried to make sense of everything he was hearing – and failed miserably. *Dark Lord... wizarding world... Potter...*

"I'm Harry Potter," he said out loud, not realising he had until Khaltar knocked him across the face. Harry fell to the ground, spitting out blood as he went. Growling, he rose to his knees again and glared at the vampire.

"This is the boy that nearly defeated Lord Voldemort!" Khaltar exclaimed,

holding his forearm. For the first time since *meeting* the creature, Harry noticed he had a tattoo on his inner forearm of a skull and snake, green flames and fear. Something inside of him detested that tattoo with every fibre of his being. *Another odd feeling, another piece of the puzzle?*

“He is,” Masorn said, returning to his throne, but still never taking his eyes off Harry. “The scar... it is the mark of death – the lightning bolt. This boy, Khaltar, is the enemy of everything dark. It may be wise to dispose of him now.”

“As my lord commands,” Khaltar replied with a hint of satisfaction, and advanced on Harry, baring his fangs.

Harry stumbled back, the chains keeping him from rising, and fell back onto the cold dark stone – almost into the paths of the other vampires behind him. They snarled and hissed at him and he rolled away.

“I commanded no such thing,” Masorn whispered. “Take him to the prisoner chambers in the north rise – put him on the Ledge. This boy is for the Dark Lord, and no other.”

Two days later
May 6th

Ron walked next to Hermione down the dark halls of Hogwarts. It was near midnight and it was their turn on rotation for the nightly DA patrols of the castle. Another three pairs of DA members were patrolling other parts of the castle, and would continue to do so until more maps could be made.

Hermione held the only map, the Marauder’s Map, at the moment, and she and Ron were heading towards a spot on the fourth floor in one of the lesser used places of the castle. Apparently two students were meeting there, after curfew, even after Dumbledore had expressly forbid

it. It could be nothing, but the DA had the authority to check it out.

“Hope Parkes and Dillon Roberts,” Hermione read off the map. They were in a disused classroom in the west wing of the fourth floor – and standing practically on top of one another. Hermione didn’t think they were Death Eaters, though Dillon was a Slytherin, and she blushed at what she thought they might be doing together. Ron was oblivious of course.

“A fifth year Slytherin and Ravenclaw,” Ron said, thinking hard. “Didn’t want to join the DA.” He had his wand gripped firmly in his hand.

Until the ink was ready for the new maps, of Hogwarts and elsewhere, the DA had to have four sets of two roaming the castle of a night. Afterwards, those on duty could just remain in their common rooms and watch the map, as the four common rooms were located at key points around the castle – each would have their own area almost equally split up.

Dumbledore was also having a magical alarm system installed and giving each group on rotation the panic button, which would alert the entire castle to danger. It was a necessary and, Hermione thought, good precaution. Hogwarts had proved, over the years, that it wasn’t the safest of places to be, contrary to what everybody believed.

But then again, she thought, Hogwarts is only a danger because of Dumbledore... and Harry. Voldemort’s greatest enemies. Even though she had known Harry for years, it still made her feel sick when she thought that he would one day have to defeat the Dark Lord. *It isn’t fair!*

“You needn’t carry your wand around like that, Ron,” Hermione told him as they climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. “It’s probably something a lot more innocent than a Death Eater meeting.”

Ron smiled slightly and shrugged. He didn’t put his wand away though, and never would while he was on duty. He had made a mistake in March, when Malfoy had portkeyed them all to Voldemort. It would not happen

again. "I feel safer holding it," he said. *And I won't lose again.*

Hermione heard what he said and also what he didn't say. She nodded, flexing her wrist to feel her own wand in its holster.

They were wearing their armour and battle robes, black robes at night – for better camouflage in the shadows. They also wore the DA rings, white gold with sparkling green gem.

Approaching the classroom with the two curfew-breakers in it, Ron held his wand arm by his side, but even through the robes and armour, Hermione could tell he was ready to strike in a heartbeat. He had, just like she and Ginny, been learning all they could about duelling over the last few months.

They entered quickly, Ron first and Hermione second, each choosing their own flank as if this was a junior Death Eater meeting. Assuming the worst and reacting appropriately. If it was a meeting it would likely result in a duel, if not then at least they were prepared. Better to be safe than sorry.

A few torches were lit in the room, and these spilled light on the two people caught in a tight embrace in one of the dusty old chairs. They gasped and jumped as Hermione and Ron entered, and Hermione recognised them as Hope Parkes and Dillon Roberts. She was sitting on his lap, arms around one another and shock written all over their faces.

Ron snorted before he could help himself and doubled over laughing, almost dropping his wand. Hermione took on a more serious approach, frowning with every ounce of authority she could muster at the pair, before glaring at Ron. He was a prefect, like her, and should take his duties more seriously.

"You two should be in your common rooms, or asleep," Hermione stated, speaking very clearly and showing the pair that she was not amused. "You are breaching a number of *very* serious school rules."

The two fifth years separated quickly, Hope smoothing her robes and blushing crimson in the pale moonlight afforded by the windows. Dillon, a tall brown haired Slytherin, was frowning and obviously wasn't pleased at being interrupted. "We weren't doing anything wrong," he grumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Oh no?" Hermione replied. "You have broken curfew, come to a disused part of the castle where anyone or anything could be, and if you're not out of here before I count to ten the Headmaster will be informed. Professor Dumbledore has made it very clear that two weeks detention in the dungeons is the penalty for being outside after nine."

Dillon tried to fluster a reply but Hermione beat him to it. "One," she said. "Two, three, four...."

The two of them ran from the room hand in hand, casting angry and uncertain glances at Hermione as they went – the night obviously not going as they planned. Hermione nodded with satisfaction as they left, and then rounded on Ron with a frown that stopped any jokes he had been about to make in their tracks.

Ron swallowed his laughter. "Not junior Death Eaters then," he said with a small smile. "Why didn't you dish out the detentions?"

Hermione shrugged. "They were... just being friendly and... well, you know. If we catch them out again I will!" she finished quickly.

No chance of that though, Hermione saw as she looked at the Marauder's Map again. Both of them had gone their separate ways, back to their houses. She folded the map away in her pocket.

Ron was bouncing on his heels and smiling when she looked up at him and she asked, "What?"

He gestured to the chair, still grinning. "D'you wanna pick up where they left off?"

Hermione looked at him for a moment and then blushed. They were supposed to be dating one another but with the war, and the fact that it was impossible to leave Hogwarts for any reason – and that Hogsmeade weekends had been cancelled because there was no Hogsmeade – they hadn't had much chance together. They had been together five months or so, and managed two brief trips out. But then now wasn't the time for what Ron was *suggesting*!

"Ron," she said sternly, fighting back the blush. "We have a job to do," she finished, patting the map in her pocket.

Ron sighed, looked wistfully at the vacant chair, and nodded. "Probably not the most romantic place in the castle anyway," he said with a sly smile, wiping away a layer of dust from one of the desks. "Let's get back to the patrol then," he ended with another sigh.

Hermione nodded and then, surprised at her own boldness, stepped forward and stood up on her toes to catch his lips with hers for just a brief kiss. "We should work out something for when we finish in June," she said, which was about a month and a half away. "My parents will want to go on holiday and I'll ask if you can come along."

Ron nodded, smiling at the prospect and holding Hermione around the waist. "If we find Harry by then," he said, his voice trembling. "I don't think it'd be right to go anywhere unless we know Harry is... safe."

Hermione sighed, putting her head against his shoulder. "It could be any day now," she whispered hopefully. The owl had been gone over ten days, and was now staying constant of a course just short of east. Wherever Harry was, he wasn't moving – and the distance between the owl and him was shortening by the minute.

"He's been gone long enough," Ron agreed. "Sooner he's back the sooner everything can get back to normal."

He was, of course, talking about the nightmares – and how they were more real than dreams. Harry was in trouble, perhaps held prisoner, and

Ron still carried a few bruises from the torture his best friend had been put through. Over the last few nights though the dreams had sort of disappeared, had become hazy.

Hermione would have given a lot to know why they had happened in the first place. Something to do with Harry, obviously, which meant it was probably something new to magic, or him breaking the old rules.

“I doubt things will ever be normal again, Ron,” Hermione whispered, stepping away from him. “But come on, we have a job to do.”

Upon the wall in the meeting room of the Order of the Phoenix, a large map of the world had been stuck up and upon it was a narrow cone heading just south of true east. It stretched from a small pinpoint in London and across Europe towards the edge of the map. A long line and somewhere upon it was Harry Potter.

Albus Dumbledore sat in his chair alone, glancing at the wall. The meeting wasn't due to start for another twenty minutes or so, so he had some time to examine the map before they began. There was no need to place much significance on most of the country that the glowing blue line touched, nor the oceans either.

One or two places along that line though were causes of concern. It stretched through long empty lands, across many seas and bodies of water, and through the Carpathian Mountains....

Dumbledore sent up a silent prayer to anyone that was listening that Harry was not in the Carpathian Mountains, the stronghold of the Vampires.... There was no reason he should be, but the line crossed over those mountains near perfectly. The owl could only be about three quarters of the way to the mountains, if that – he just prayed it veered away soon.

There had been an increasing number of reports over the last few weeks

that the vampires were more active lately, more thirsty. The Fourteen Clans had all met for the first time in living memory, and rumour was many of them had sworn for Tom.

Despite all that he had been through in his long years, Dumbledore shivered. Thousands of vampires joining the Dark Lord was unthinkable. The Aurors were not ready for such an attack – not against an army of such size. Not for the first time, Dumbledore thought of informing the Muggles of the crisis facing the entire planet. Their armies were huge, millions of soldiers, but they were easier to slaughter.

Cannon fodder, he thought grimly. I will not let them become that....

Ever vigilant, Dumbledore kept his eyes on the tracking device placed in the centre of the ornate wooden table. It shone faintly blue now, and would burst into a blinding red when the owl's letter was removed – presumably by Harry. Post owls, unless otherwise instructed, did not let anyone other than the recipient remove their letters.

Shaking his head, Dumbledore was at a loss. He did not know what to do about Harry, and the vampires. If he knew anything of the last surviving Potter, that boy would be in the thick of whatever was happening. Fate, or something higher, seemed to draw him into these things.

"Stay strong, Harry," Dumbledore whispered – silently willing the owl on. "We're coming."

The Timeless Battle

He had known it would happen, had known ever since Potter stopped the fabric of Existence from burning to ash. The Guardian, Gryffindor, shone brightly in the darkness of the Boundary – which had become a battlefield on many different levels of reality.

The Destroyers had come, after countless aeons they had decided not

to work from the shadows, play by the sidelines, and the War for Creation was begun in earnest.

Millions of other shining bright lights surrounded Gryffindor, and he was just one soldier amongst them all – a barrier against the equally numerous dark Destroyers who were vying for control of the Boundary. They wanted to tear it open, and plunge many layers of Existence into its darkness. Only they could rule such a poisoned realm of death.

The Destroyers had no visible form beyond a shade of darkness dimmer than the darkness of the Boundary. Gryffindor could see them now and he gathered his strength. A wall of the deepest black moving towards their line of light, crackling in places with silver lightning.

As one, as they were all linked now, the Guardians channelled their power into a massive wall of pure energy, and sent it forward racing across millions of miles to intercept the fury of the Destroyers. The Boundary shook with the impact and holes were rent in its reality, but that couldn't be helped.

Many worlds of both mortal and immortal would fall in this war, and it had only just begun.

Gryffindor silently wept as he, as the ascended Guardians, damaged what they had sworn to protect for all of time – even though time did not exist here. This battle wasn't the first in the War for Creation and it would not be the last – it was one of the few that was fought outside of time though, and as such could not be changed.

They had to win here, or lose more ground to the Destroyers, to Evil. They had to win, or more worlds would be overrun with the fires of Hell. There was a balance, the Balance, being broken here... and in that there could be no winner.

May 8th

Odd dreams Harry was having whenever he managed to sleep in his inescapable and terribly cold prison. He dreamed of war, of light and dark, of a deep golden light that battled away all of the wrong. He dreamed of freedom, of memory. He did not dream of salvation.

The Ledge, as the vampire had called it, was just that. The vampires lived *inside* of a mountain, within hollowed out caves and tunnels. And high up near the peak, accessible only by an iron door several inches thick, a ledge jutted out atop of a sheer cliff face hundreds of feet high. It was about ten feet by ten feet, cut into the mountain, and to Harry it was a prison without bars.

It was evening now, the sun had just set, and the night time chill was just beginning. He shivered, gazing up at the stars in the clear night sky. He lay on uneven ground upon the ledge, six feet away a drop of five hundred feet lay, and behind him a door into the vampires hold.

He laughed but it ended up a grimace. It was a choice between death and death. Time had lost all meaning up here, on the Ledge. There was no way off and the creatures hadn't seen fit to let him back in – he supposed that was a good thing. It got cold at night, *very* cold, possibly below zero. He was up in the mountains, after all.

During the day the view was astounding. He looked down hundreds of feet into lush green valleys and saw the winding coils of rivers that were thinner than his fingers. In the distance other mountains rose with snow capped peaks, piercing the clouds and silhouetted against the heavens. It was quite beautiful, but ultimately he believed it was the last beautiful thing he would ever see.

Once a day, and soon on this day, he was fed a bowl of grey sludge through a gap that opened in the rusted iron door. It was like a watery bowl of porridge, but fouler and greasier. He didn't like to think what was in it, but it also doubled up as the only drink he got as well. It kept him alive, as did his burning passion for vengeance.

The half-moon had just risen over the distant foothills and mountains when there was a loud creaking and grinding sound behind him, and Harry rolled over to face the door as, for the first time in memory, it opened – allowing a familiar and hateful face to walk through and out onto his prison.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter,” Lord Masorn smiled, his black wings twitching and reeking on the cold air. He looked down at Harry with satisfaction, a look of a man who was sure he had won.

Harry just glared.

“How are you finding my hospitality?” Masorn asked, pacing up and down but always keeping his eyes on Harry’s. “Do you know that hundreds have asked for the honour of killing you? Thousands!”

“When you’re popular....” Harry managed, smiling weakly.

Masorn smiled and his yellow eyes watered. “I admire your courage, Darkslayer. How old are you? Sixteen? I myself am over three thousand years old, and yet I have never met another human who was as defiant as you are.”

“What do you want with me?” Harry asked. *Why am I here?*

Masorn scowled and reached down to Harry’s head with a long, clawed hand. He seized a handful of the boy’s hair and lifted him up to his feet, pushing him against the wall and holding him there. “I want you to die, Potter,” Masorn growled, his breath making Harry gag. “You are the Darkslayer – Man of Prophecy, Enemy of Darkness – I wish you had never been born into this world, and I want to see you die.”

Harry grunted and struggled against the creature’s grasp – but he was just too weak. He settled for scowling and said, “I bet your mother told you the same thing.”

Half a second later and his nose was broken, blood spurting down his

face even as Masorn withdrew his clenched fist. Pain he could deal with though, and he bared his teeth, strengthened his glare. Using his fingers now, Masorn ran his hand across Harry's upper lip, covering them in his blood. He brought them to his mouth, and shrieked piercingly when it touched his withered tongue.

"Your blood is stronger than any I have ever tasted, and I have tasted the blood of millions."

He didn't acknowledge that, couldn't acknowledge that. A thought came to him. "W-Who is the Dark Lord?" Harry asked, sighing.

Masorn blinked. "You play me for a fool!" he said after a moment, uncertainty passing through his eyes. "You are the Dark Lord's greatest enemy! You have met him in battle many times."

Suddenly Harry was laughing, he could not help it. Laughter which eventually turned to sobs wracked his entire body, and he shook in the vampires iron grasp. "Another piece of the puzzle," he said to himself, "accept I don't have a picture of what it should look like!"

Masorn tossed him to the hard rocky ground and Harry spat out a mouthful of blood and saliva. Before he knew what was happening, the king of vampires seized his matted hair again and pulled his head up whilst kneeling on his back – clearly exposing his throat. Harry froze.

"I want you dead more than I have wanted anything in centuries," Masorn whispered into his ear. "You are the opposite of everything I and my kind stand for – but you will have your uses before the end. The Dark Lord – your enemy – will reward us well for you, alive. In spite of that, I could kill you now...." He drew a razor sharp claw against Harry's throat.

He swallowed, feeling the claw pierce his skin. Harry did not dare say anything – he knew when to keep his mouth shut.

"I could kill you, but then again there are things a lot worse than death – and Lord Voldemort will make sure you learn of every one of them."

Harry winced as the vampire twisted his hair and, with his other clawed hand, swiped a bunch of his twisted black hair from his head.

Harry hit the ground and rolled over as the pressure was released from his throat and back, and he frowned up at his hair in Masorn's decaying grip.

"A precaution," the vampire said, retreating towards the door and motioning to the hair. "Should we need you destroyed." His laughter remained with Harry for many minutes after the iron door closed again.

Lacking the energy to move and shivering once again in the cold, Harry glared out at the night sky – wishing and praying for a way out. Of course there wasn't one, hadn't been even when he had the strength to try and escape. There were also wards, apparently, against escape. Khaltar had gloated over that when he had been brought up here. Anti-apparation wards or something, whatever that meant?

God, I want to remember! Even if he died for remembering, he needed to know who he was, *why he was*, and what was happening. It tore at him, tortured him. These vampires feared him, that much was clear – and he did not know why. Perhaps if he did, he could give them a real reason to fear him.

"I'll destroy them...." he managed, rubbing his bare chest. He coughed as he did and brought up a phlegmy substance onto the mountain ledge. He knew he had a chest infection, perhaps something serious as he was always short of breath and every breath he did draw hurt like all hell.

Drifting between sleep and terrible reality, Harry didn't notice the small animal that landed on the ledge about ninety minutes after Masorn left. The blood from his nose had dried to his face and chest and his breath came in ragged agonising bursts. He was dreaming, and mixed thoughts came in this dream between being awake and teetering into sleep.

"We can't hold them!" a sphere of light shouted. "We must abandon the Higher Realms!"

“NEVER!” roared the second sphere. “NOT WHILE ONE OF US STILL EXISTS!”

“Something drives these Destroyers on and weakens us at the same time,” another sphere said. “We can’t win, Gryff—

Harry awoke with a start as something had bitten him hard on the side of his head. He turned and gasped as his own eyes locked with a pair of curious amber ones. They belonged to a bird, an owl that was the colour of snow. For a moment he just stared, unbelieving that a wild creature would get so close.

“Were you trying to eat me?” he asked the owl as, amazingly, the snowy white bird stepped up onto his chest and looked down at him, turning its head from side to side.

The owl squawked, and even though it was impossible, Harry thought the bird sounded indignant, offended, angry that he would suggest such a thing. He found himself wanting to apologise.

Unaware that he was smiling, Harry slowly raised his hand and stroked the bird’s neck, it hooted serenely and he felt calm. “This is no place for you,” he told the owl, sighing deeply. “You’re lucky, you can fly away. Get out of here before anything nasty comes through that door.”

Harry did not find it odd that the owl shook its head as he began to lose consciousness again. Before he faded, he was aware of the owl snuggling down into the crook of his arm. It was hooting softly in a vaguely familiar way.

[Chapter 4 – The Return of the Hero](#)

*We've inherited freedom from all those
who have fought for it.*

~~Snake

*Ministry of Magic
Press Conference Hall*

Arthur Weasley, British Minister for Magic, sat at the centre of an elongated table that stretched for three seats either side of him. Behind him was a giant crest of the Ministry, two wands crossed over the green islands of the United Kingdom, and before him, in the hall, one hundred witches and wizards from the world's media were being seated, having just come from the announcement hall.

Arthur tapped his fingers on the table before him in thought as more people up the back filed in and were seated. Cameras flashed, dozens of them, from the photographers kneeling down before the seats, but after months as minister Arthur was used to it.

Thinking back, he was still amazed that he had been given this job – there were many others suited to it that had, at the time, been higher in the Ministry, even the Under Secretary could have claimed the position – but everyone had chosen him. He knew why – because of what he had done on the day Fudge had died and dozens had been slaughtered in Diagon Alley.

He had made himself somewhat of a hero that day, being the only Ministry Head of Department to do anything without fear for his own life. After that, the government needed a figurehead the public liked and respected – and it had been him. Arthur chuckled wryly; everything had changed within the space of a day.

He had done the best he could in the job, he thought. Being the Minister made the Order's job a whole lot easier, and he had been preparing this country for war. It was still damn near impossible to sway the International Confederation though, who wanted no part in the troubles, and that would undoubtedly be one of the questions flung at him today.

Arthur glanced to his right and nodded to Madam Bones as she took her seat, and then in turn to all his other Department Heads. They had all been chosen for their loyalty once he was in control of the Ministry and had worked hard at their jobs. Briefly, Arthur glanced at the white-robed men and women spaced periodically along the perimeter of the hall – the Aurors.

That'll be another question, he thought with a grimace, why are the Auror numbers still so low?

He was doing all he could there, but it was impossible and wrong to lower the requirements needed to be an Auror. The men and women who applied were not just meat for a grinder, they were people, and they would pass the performance tests if they wanted to be an Auror.

Although the numbers were growing almost monthly. Seven hundred new recruits since Harry's disappearance, and if they were lucky a hundred of them would make it to the other end and become an Auror. If they were lucky... a safer estimate, truer, would probably be about sixty.

"Are you ready to begin, Minister?" a quiet voice said to his left. Arthur smiled and turned to look at his son, Percy.

He never mentioned the time Percy had turned on his family anymore, but it still hung over them all like a storm cloud waiting to burst. After Fudge's death, Arthur had seen no reason why Percy could not continue his position in the Minister's office – he had, after all, apologised months before that.

Percy knew he had been wrong though, and had admitted as much. It had taken a lot of courage and humility to come back to his family – where he was always welcome – and he had done it. Arthur had forgiven him almost immediately... and yet the betrayal still hung over them.

Surveying the crowd before answering, Arthur sensed the impatience of most in the room. Cameras still flashed almost every second, but the latest news leaflets that had been distributed had all been read – some crunched up and left on the floor – and the press wanted to ask their questions.

“Very well,” Arthur sighed, putting a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Open the floor to questions.”

Percy nodded, scribbled furiously on a piece of parchment for a moment, and then stood. A hush fell over the one hundred and fifty faces in the crowd.

“Good morning,” Percy began, his voice louder than usual – amplified by magic in the air behind the desk, “and welcome to the Ministry of Magic. We thank you for your patience and would like, at this time, to open the floor to questions.”

Having been doing this for years, the main national and international papers got in first, seated up the front as they were. Arthur could never remember all of their names, there were a full three dozen, but Percy had them down perfectly. In these situations, his son really was indispensable – made for the job. Arthur thought that one day he would probably be Minister.

Percy was still standing when the reporter’s jumped up from their seats and began to shout for their questions to be heard. Percy scanned the crowd and said in a large, clear voice, “Ian Lighterman, The Daily Prophet.”

The hubbub died down slowly and the others sat down. A tall man with a sparse growth of thick beard remained standing, levitated parchment with quill poised upon it before him at waist height.

“My question is for the Minister,” he began in a smooth, clear voice. “Minister Weasley, what do you say to the rumours that you may be pulling Britain out of the International Alliance?”

Arthur suppressed a grimace. “That rumour is false,” he said, his voice amplified across the room. “To win the coming conflict the United Kingdom will need all of her allies.”

Lighterman wasn’t finished. “True, Minister, but we have seen a... lack, of sorts, of help from the international community over the last few months. They don’t understand our troubles. Don’t you think the Ministry should be doing more?”

Arthur kept his face calm, neutral. "There is not much more we can do, Mr. Lighterman," he said, raising his palms and shrugging. "We petition the International Confederation every time it convenes, we approach international communities individually... they want nothing to do with our war."

"Then perhaps the International Alliance is not worth the parchment it is printed on... any comment, Minister?"

Arthur nodded. "We will stand by our allies over the next few months, and continue to train more Aurors. We will be more than prepared this time to face... V-Voldemort... and I assure you we will not lose."

A wave of gasps spread throughout the room when *his* name was mentioned, and Arthur gritted his teeth to prevent his own. He had said the name, more than once now, because it would help the people – help his image of a leader. Leaders were supposed to be fearless, strong. Still, he gritted his teeth.

Percy was standing again. "Olivia Codiam, Wizingard Express."

Ian Lighterman sat down as a blonde haired witch stood up, flinging her hair over one shoulder. She also had quill and parchment poised and at the ready. "Minister Weasley," she began, "does the Ministry know where this... the Dark Lord is hiding at the moment?"

Knowing he couldn't hesitate, Arthur spoke quickly. "At this time the main bulk of our resources is being thrown behind the Auror Program – behind the defence of our world. We cannot reveal any intelligence information pertaining to that matter for very obvious reasons, Miss Codiam."

The blonde witch smiled arrogantly. "Of course, Minister. Then tell me, what is your Ministry doing to make sure we do not have another repeat of the Hogsmeade incident?"

Hogsmeade, Arthur thought. Two months later and still the reconstruction was going on. It had been completely and utterly razed to the ground during Voldemort's last attack. That village would never be the same.

“Well, boosting Auror numbers you know about. In those information booklets we handed out there is detailed information on the safety precautions being implemented around our world’s key wizarding locations. Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley amongst them. Wards, guards, and dark detectors are in place. Obviously, we can’t reveal the exact specifications because, well, Miss Codiam, we are at war.”

The witch sat down with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes and as one the rest of the news reporter’s jumped up, screaming to be heard. Percy sighed and pointed to a little woman in the front row, her robes a shocking shade of violet.

“Aeryn Silverton, International Express,” he said.

Following the rules, all others fell silent as the small witch stood, smoothing out her robes with a dangerous smile as she did. “My question is directed at the Ministry as a whole,” she said, still smiling coldly. “It has been two months almost since Harry Potter was declared missing, two months and many tens of thousands of galleons later and he is still missing. I ask the Ministry if this is money and energy well spent?”

Arthur felt his colleagues shuffling nervously to his right and left, and he himself felt a bit out of sorts at the question. Harry was a hot topic, especially because not a single trace of him had been found in the two months. He cleared his throat.

“Harry Potter is....” He trailed away. “Harry Potter is vital, *will* be vital to our war effort.” The cameras were flashing again. “We must find him if we’re to have any chance of a quick victory when the Dark Lord brings his war.”

“Yes,” Silverton said, “but you have to admit, Minister, as every day passes it is becoming more and more likely that the boy is dead.”

Arthur shook his head, angrily. “Harry Potter is alive.”

“You know this for fact?”

“N-No... but I have to believe it, as do all of you,” Arthur sighed. *Bugger*, he thought, *that was not a good reply – bleeding politics*.

The short witch was still standing, her quill scribbling furiously for her. "Have you read Jason Arbuck's biography of Potter, Minister?" she asked, holding up a thick book with a picture of Harry taken a year ago on the cover, moving and staring out calmly. His scar was clearly visible between his fringe.

Arthur had read it, had been given a copy a week before its release. It detailed his life, interviewed his friends – Arthur's children – and ran through his Hogwarts years with a surprising accuracy. It had helped boost Auror recruits, boost the world's morale. To see and know what Harry had done and been through in his short sixteen years had made people angry – made them want to fight. Dumbledore had arranged it all.

"I have, madam," he said. "And it is one of the reasons I believe Harry Potter to be alive." Quills were tearing across parchment and the camera flashes intensified. "You know what he has already survived – I doubt a bit of experimental magic could destroy him."

That was the story that had been circulated. Voldemort had developed some new destructive magic to use to destroy Hogwarts. Harry had sacrificed himself to stop it. Arthur knew there were elements of truth in that story; in fact it was true – just not the whole truth. He suspected Dumbledore knew more about whatever Voldemort and Harry had done than he said, but he kept it to himself for a good reason.

"Is it safe, Minister, to trust a reckless individual like Potter with the safety of our world?" the woman relentlessly continued.

Merlin, Arthur thought, *why do they always want the bad news?*

"If any one man has to be charged with the defence of our *entire* world, we could do a lot worse than Harry Potter – and none better. I'll say this now, and only once, Harry Potter is a hero, one of thousands, fighting a war he didn't start. We're lucky to have him."

The woman's grin deepened. "But that's just it, isn't it, Minister... you don't have him. He is lost."

She sat down and the shouting started again. Arthur sighed and rubbed his face – it was going to be a long day.

Severus Snape glared out of the nearby window at the night sky, holding his still burning forearm. He had been summoned – for the first time in over a month he had been summoned. And it had been painful... in more ways than one.

We're doomed, he thought before he could stop himself. Snarling, he hit his fist against the wall and continued on towards Albus's study.

That thought would not leave him though. The Dark Lord had barely recovered from his bout with Potter, and even now his power was beyond belief. A display of power had cowed even the most sceptical Death Eaters. Their master was indestructible, immortal.

It certainly seemed that way at least. The Dark Lord had been using wandless magic, similar to Potter, and his arms had been shrouded in a flowing fusion of blood-red pure magic. Snape shivered in spite of himself.

The war would start again soon, perhaps next week perhaps in a month – soon. Death Eater recruitment was on the increase – that had been one of the reasons for tonight's summons. Sixty two new recruits had been branded with the Dark Mark. Severus started to count the cost in his head.

A lot more were going to die before this was done.

Before he knew it, his thoughts had taken him up through the castle and passed the gargoyle defending Dumbledore's office. He rose up the stairs and, with a brief knock, walked into the Headmaster's study.

"Albus," he began, seeing the old man seated behind his desk. "I—"

Snape cut himself short as he saw the other wizard in the room, standing with his back to the fire. He recognised his face instantly – his name was Jon Rafter, and he was Chief Sorcerer of the American Council in the International Confederation.

"Good evening, Severus," Dumbledore said, twinkle in his eye. "What can I do for you tonight?"

Snape folded his arms into his robes and ignored the still burning mark. "I... I must speak with you urgently, and privately, Albus," he said, glancing quickly at Rafter – a tall man with a strong face and piercing dark eyes.

"This is our Potions Master Severus Snape," Dumbledore said, addressing the American Sorcerer. "Severus, this is Jonathan Rafter – one of my colleagues in the International Confederation."

Snape nodded curtly at the man, who was fingering the edge of his cloak with utter confidence. "A pleasure...."

"As I was saying, Jonathan," Dumbledore continued. "I will continue to petition the IC to see reason in this matter. Our war will become your war."

The sorcerer nodded. "As you will, Albus – the response will be the same though."

Dumbledore sighed. "You hang yourself, my friend."

Severus could feel the tension in the room, could chop through it with his wand if he swung it through the air. Rafter and Albus may be all smiles on the outside, but underneath both were furious.

"Until the next meeting then," Jon sighed, and with a flourish of his cloak he turned to the fire and threw a handful of floo powder into the flames. He disappeared in a swirl of green flames.

"A most unpleasant man," Dumbledore practically spat as soon as he was gone. Snape could rarely recall seeing the headmaster lose his temper. "What is it you want, Severus?"

"I was summoned this evening."

Dumbledore nodded sadly, but a glint of anticipation shone in his eyes. "It has been awhile... tell me everything."

Snape did not know where to begin. He was scared – beyond scared. Nothing was making sense anymore. "Albus, we are in trouble...."

Ginny fired off curses one after another into the moving targets she had required into the Room of Requirement. Some were dressed in Death Eater robes, some as Aurors, some as civilians, and others as Hogwarts students. She had been doing this drill for the last two hours, and in that time it had become increasingly more difficult.

The Death Eaters and Auror dummies, wooden and vaguely human in shape, could fire stinging hexes. Ginny pretended that they were all Killing Curses – that way one hit was fatal. She weaved in between the red strings of stinging hexes gracefully, and fired destructive curses from her wand at the black robed figures.

Several exploded in showers of splinters and five minutes later, with all friendly targets unhurt, Ginny stood panting and sweating amongst a lot of wooden debris. With a thought she made it disappear, and wiped the sweat off her brow with the sleeve of her white battle robes. The robes were charmed with a few defensive charms.

Ginny knew that it would be a lot different in a real battle than this simulated one she had created. Here the enemies had to obey rules and laws, they didn't feel anything – they were not human. In the real world anything was possible, as emotion came into the fight. Still, it was good wand practice.

Her practice done for the day, Ginny headed back to Gryffindor tower for a shower and bed. She had sworn to herself that she would practice the drills recommended in the Auror handbook for at least ninety minutes a day. She had been doing so for a month, and in that time her duelling skills had become very impressive. To the DA, at least.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when she snuck back into the common room, silently thankful that she did not run into Filch or any of the DA members on patrol. Ron and Hermione were out with the only map tonight, but they knew what she was up to in the Room of Requirement and wouldn't disturb her.

It being a school night, the common room was practically deserted. A few sixth and seventh years were still up, talking quietly in the cosy corners, laughing or studying. She wished she could do the same with Harry.

Sighing and feeling only a small measure of loss, Ginny walked up the stairs to the girl's dormitories. Her grief had lessened somewhat over the two months Harry had been gone. It hurt to think about it and at times she still found herself crying, but she had accepted in her heart that he *would* be back, and it was only a matter of time.

Still, she found herself cursing that owl they had sent out. *It's had enough time to get halfway round the world*, she thought, knowing she was being unfair. *Why hasn't it found him?*

Ginny unlaced her dragon hide boots and pulled off her socks before grabbing her pyjamas and stepping across the corridor into the showers. She tried not to think of Harry as the warm water in the shower streamed down her face, but that of course made her think of him. It was a cruel circle.

Twenty minutes later and Ginny collapsed onto her bed with a sigh, only pulling the thin blanket over her body as it was getting warmer in the castle as they approached summer. She thought about all the study she had to do for her OWLs which started in a week, and then decided to think about it in the morning. It wasn't long before she fell asleep.

"So, you are the one he walked across eternity for," a voice in the darkness said. It was a cold voice, emotionless, and Ginny felt malice in it.

"Who's there?" she called into the darkness, grasping the sides of her robes. A cold and cruel wind gushed past her and she gasped.

"He cannot win, you know," the voice said, and Ginny knew she was dreaming – dreaming of a reality some place else. She also knew that the voice was talking about Harry.

"He will win," she found herself saying. It was a dream... only a dream. Dreams couldn't hurt, right?

The voice laughed. "Too much rides against the Darkslayer this time you foolish mortal! The weight of the Destroyers will grind him into dust before he can stop the chaos."

Ginny turned to see only more darkness, but even as she did a pale light lingered on the horizon. Behind her, the owner of the voice hissed and shrieked. She frowned as the light came closer and the presence behind her growled and roared.

As it got closer Ginny realised that the light was a person, a face she knew bathed in the purest light. It was Harry!

“HARRY!” she screamed and threw herself at him. She fell right through him and hit the stone of the invisible floor hard, wincing as her finger was cut on a sharp rock. She sucked it and turned to look at the light – at Harry.

He carried two swords, two identical swords and blue fire raged up and down them. Harry folded them over before him, shielding her, and light fell on the creature before him. It was a... blackness... a storm cloud which crackled with blue power.

“You do not belong here,” the dark being said, hate emanating off it in waves towards Harry.

Ginny could see Harry’s face – he looked confused, glancing at the swords and the blue fire. “WHO AM I?” he roared.

His voice was pure power and it gave Ginny hope, made her feel safe. Here was Harry, and it was his job to protect everyone. She would be fine because Harry was—

“Existence will not suffer the both of us, Darkslayer,” the dark cloud hissed. “Not this time. DIE!”

A bolt of lightning burst from within the folds of misty cloud before Harry, and Ginny screamed as it struck—

Harry coughed and sat huddled in a corner of rock trying to shield himself from the relentless bitter wind that was killing him. He knew he was dying from one infection or another. Every breath he drew made him want to roar in agony, and it had been many hours since he was able to take a deep breath – he was trying to sleep.

But sleep was long in coming, and he couldn't help the fits of coughing that wracked his body every few minutes. No one had been up to see him in days, and the only contact he had with his torturers was the bowl of thin paste shoved through his cell door at night. He hadn't been able to swallow any for two days. It was an effort to even stand now.

The snowy white owl was still with him, despite his best efforts to get rid of it. The bird just would not leave him, and Harry felt a certain familiarity for it after the second day. At night it disappeared, presumably to hunt, but it always came back. He stroked the bird gently now, as it was nestled down before him – a buffer for the wind, he thought.

“Something better happen soon....” he croaked, and the owl hooted. “In a day or two I don't think it is gonna matter one way or another....” He was dead, he suspected, he just didn't accept it yet.

The mountain ledge was bitterly cold and he drifted in and out of consciousness. That was another torture. The elements and his pain kept him awake, when he was beyond tired, and when he did sleep it wasn't restful. Clouds blocked out the sky on this night, and after a few cough free minutes Harry drifted into an uncomfortable and disturbing sleep.

He stood shrouded in darkness, with two swords in his hands crossed over his chest. He looked down at the swords just as they burst to life with blue power. Two words were engraved into each silver blade:

Godric Gryffindor

Harry frowned and realised that he was glowing, shining with a bright white light in this otherwise dark and dreary place.

“The dream world,” he said, and surprised even himself. That thought was gone a moment later.

Wherever this was, he wasn't hurt or dying in it. He took true deep breaths and flexed his limbs in a way he had not been able to do for days that seemed like centuries.

Something was pulling at him, away to his left, and before he realised it he was walking that way with his swords blazing. It did not take long and

he saw, or rather felt, a dark evil presence before him. That power inside of him roared defiance at it once again, and he was blind to all else as he approached that monster.

“HARRY!”

On the edge of his vision he saw and felt another person – a human – he glanced briefly that way just in time to see a lot of auburn hair before she fell through him and went down hard onto the ground.

Inside of his head, something thrummed and he felt almost an irresistible urge to protect that shadowy figure he had just barely glimpsed from the evil before them both.

“You do not belong here,” the dark being said, hate emanating off it in waves towards Harry.

Harry felt the scum in the creature before him and his grip tightened on the swords across his arms. He knew instinctively that they were razor sharp and could cut through anything – and yet he felt entirely confident holding them. They were a part of him, and he was terrified of it.

Before he knew it he was crying, tears streaming down his face. “WHO AM I?” he roared, feeling nothing but deep and bitter anguish.

The darkness before him writhed. “Existence will not suffer the both of us, Darkslayer,” the dark cloud said. “Not this time. DIE!”

Harry’s eyes hardened into something... else... when a bolt of electric blue light surged through the air towards him. It struck, and he sliced it in two with his glowing blades – severing the power strike and advancing on the cloud.

“I may not know what is happening,” he growled. “But if one of us has to die....”

His glittering swords came down on the roiling mist and a sharp light burst forth from everywhere and nowhere. Everything stopped for a heartbeat, and a voice – neither dark nor light – could be heard across this dreaming world.

“No matter how hard you try, Darkslayer – Harry Potter – there are too many battles to fight this time. Choose – your world, or all worlds.”

Harry awoke with a start screaming, his throat dry and hoarse. He burned, his skin was on fire, he was crying – or at least he thought he was, in reality he may not have been. He didn't know any longer.

The cold wind gusted at him but his numb limbs no longer felt it. He was afraid, afraid of who he was, what was happening, why even nightmares seemed to be against him.

The snowy owl was huddled against his bare chest and it was a small source of feathery warmth. “You have nowhere else to be?” he asked the bird softly.

It just hooted.

Above all else at the moment, Harry had one hell of a headache. He pressed a hand to his feverish forehead and bit back on the pain. His thoughts were slurred, mixed and surging against a... a block... he could feel inside of his mind. All the answers were behind that block, he knew, and time was washing it away.

Time slipped a lot as well... it had been dark when he fell asleep, possibly around midnight, but now the sun was setting in the west again. Twilight stretched across the sky, purples mixed with oranges leaving an azure reckoning that pulled at Harry's mind strongly.

Twilight, he mused, *it should be twilight*.

His eyes were unfocused on the sky, but after a time he became aware of a spot on the horizon that was growing closer with every passing minute. He could see for miles up on this ledge, and it wasn't long before he recognised it as a bird – another owl. The snowy white one hooted in recognition as well, and Harry managed to sit up against the stone wall.

The owl was still a good half a mile away, but he blinked and everything spun and when he opened his eyes again the bird was that half a mile closer, and swooping down on the air currents towards his ledge-prison. It alighted softly on the rock, claws scratching against the stone and approached Harry slowly.

He blinked, not finding it at all odd anymore, as the large tawny owl stepped up onto his bare knee and *offered* its leg to him. Frowning, not sure if he was hallucinating or had finally snapped, Harry saw that there was a... a scroll of paper attached to the bird's thin leg with a red cord. Around its other leg hung a small ring of what looked like metal – glistening metal.

He reached forward for the paper, and as soon as he touched it the metal ring burst to life and shone with a deep pulsing red light.

Remus sat staring at the map on the wall in the meeting room at Grimmauld Place. A thin beam covered the map of the world, heading just short of east, and along that line he knew the last reason he was still alive stood – perhaps a prisoner in the Carpathian Mountains. Though how that came about he may never know.

It was a fact taught in History of Magic in seventh year, that the Carpathian Mountains were home to the vampire colonies. The last vampire colonies on the planet. Miles upon miles of tunnels and caves that stretched up to the highest peaks and down into the bowels of the earth. If Harry was in there, then all hope was lost.

The owl, given its estimated speed, would be right over those mountains right now. Remus knew this, it was his turn to watch the tracking stone, and he silently prayed that it would not go off now – not over those mountains. He couldn't stand failure again – not after failing James... and then Sirius.

The full moon was three nights away and Remus knew he had to get his potion before that – take it once a night for the two nights preceding the change. Even after the long years of his life he still feared each and every change into the... wolf, and this time was no different.

Running his hands through hair greyer than it had been two months ago, Remus glanced casually at the tracking stone on the polished ornate table in front of him, and then back up to the map.

“Don't go off... please, not there. We'll never get him out of there....”

If it did go off, Remus would have to alert Dumbledore immediately, and then Kingsley – who would bring twenty four Aurors, two squads, with him. But to those mountains? They would have to negotiate with the vampire leader – Masorn – he was called for Harry's release. Hunted for centuries by wizards and Muggles alike. He had once also been known as Dracula.

Remus shivered, forcing himself to face the facts. If Harry was a prisoner of the vampires then no force on this earth could free him short of death. But he would die trying if it came to that, otherwise what was there to live for?

Only Harry, he thought, guilt and pain chipping away at his soul. *There's only Harry left...*

And then it got worse as tears sprung into Remus' eyes – the tracking stone, on the centre of the table, shone with a blazing blood-red light. Cursing, Remus wiped his eyes and grabbed the stone, heading for the floo hub to take him to Dumbledore's office.

In the end, really, he had expected it no other way. Life was rarely fair, and if it was, something was wrong.

Harry couldn't feel the parchment in his cold numb hands but he unravelled it anyway, facing away from the wind so it didn't blow away – he could not be sure how hard he was holding it, his arms barely worked at all.

A black ink in a familiar script met his eyes and a sharp stab of pain burst through his mind. He recognised the handwriting, but that was all. Shaking, rasping, dying, Harry read slowly.

"Dear... Harry...." he croaked. "Where... are... you? Come...."

home. We miss you, and we know that Hedwig has flown off to find you. We hope this finds you as well. Ron and I know nothing about what happened to you after you stepped into the tear. We don't know what could have happened but if you're in a Muggle Hospital, you can call my

parents on this number, (01865) 567214.

We know you're alive, Harry – you have to be. If Hedwig can find you then you must be. Write us a letter and send it back with her or this other owl. We attached a tracking device to it, Harry, so we can find you as well. Please be safe and stay out of trouble.

There's not much more to say because we don't know what's happened. Ginny misses you terribly, as does everyone else. Contact us if you can and we'll get help, no matter what's happening or where you are.

We miss you, Harry.

Love,

Ron

&

Hermione

Harry knew his hands were shaking and he could *feel* them gripping the paper, no, parchment, as if it was all that were keeping him alive. His fingers throbbed as warmth flowed into them from some... some source of power inside of him, and before he realised it the parchment burst into flames in his hands, and his mind exploded.

Harry roared – he screamed! The mountain shook and he clawed to his feet grasping the sides of his head, before his knees gave way and the stone cut them open. Something else... gave way... inside of his mind, some thought had triggered that breaking, and sense flowed into the large, ultimately empty parts of his mind where his history, his memories had been missing.

Tears of joy and pain streamed down his face as he *remembered*.

And, for the love of God and all that was Right, it was awful.

He continued to scream even after his voice gave out. It was a silent scream after that, as he clawed at his face, digging gouges into his cheeks with his fingernails. Blood flowed freely down them and his eyes crackled with blue power, surging across it in waves.

He jerked up into an upright position on his knees, snow and wind hurtling around him at a thousand miles an hour – the very air laced with

pure power. He felt a presence in his mind and before his eyes a light shone and a body grew out of it.

“YEEHAW!” Ethan Rafe roared, punching his fist up into the air and turning around towards Harry. “We’re back, Potter.”

The letter, the names, had triggered his mind, broke away the barriers – the block – and now that the memories had been fused back onto his soul, a serene almost dead calm floated over Harry. Despite the sicknesses wracking his body, he stood, smiled at Ethan, and shook his hand like an old friend.

“You at a loss for words, Harry?” Ethan asked, and Harry knew he was a soul in his mind – could remember when it had happened atop of Slytherin Fortress. He had remained, even after all of the changes to Existence. Did that mean he was here, as well as alive back in his own world?

Not now.

Harry didn’t speak, even as the wind died down and the snow ceased swirling. Hedwig was still on the ledge, and when Harry looked at her she flew up to sit on his shoulder. Turning to the iron door that had been all but impregnable ten minutes ago, Harry whispered a word and it fell to the ground as dust – revealing a dark and sparsely lit corridor leading into the vampire stronghold.

“Fly away, Hedwig,” he whispered and the air shook at the strength in his words. Nothing could resist it. “I’ll meet you back in England.”

Nipping his ear affectionately, she hooted and took flight from his shoulder instantly, disappearing into the twilight sky moments later. The other tawny owl followed her.

“So... this thing you’re about to do, is it business or pleasure?” Ethan asked, leaning against the wall in a black collared shirt and jeans. He folded his arms over his chest and grinned, seeing Harry’s thoughts.

Harry smiled grimly, and beings of unimaginable power *had* quailed in another time before that smile. “Can’t it be both?” he mused, winking at

Ethan. That said and done, he walked half naked into the vampire stronghold, the darkness consuming him almost instantly.

The ledge that he had been kept prisoner on crumbled away to nothing as he left it, and in the air his presence still hung – *just a feeling that something, neither good nor bad, had occurred here. Time would tell.*

Either way, Harry Potter was back – and all bets are, once again, off.

“Are you certain, Albus? Are you absolutely certain?”

“I’m afraid so, Dermal,” Dumbledore sighed, feeling every year of his age. “The owl delivered its letter to Harry in the Carpathian Mountains, and we all know what lives there.”

In the Auror Operations Room in one of the most secure parts of the Ministry, Dermal Trask, Albus Dumbledore, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Remus Lupin all sat in dreaded silence as they digested the news that Remus had delivered. Their options were severely limited in this matter.

“Well we have to try and negotiate for his release,” Remus said, simply as he saw it. “There must be something the vampires want that we can give them, something we can use magic for.”

“No more than Voldemort can,” Dumbledore said, “and Tom is willing to use a lot darker means – something the vampires will relish – to get what he wants. I have no doubt that if he doesn’t know Harry is a prisoner there, he soon will. Many vampire clans have sworn to him already.”

“Then force,” Remus continued. “We’ll take every Auror we have and raze those mountains to the ground if needs be.”

“It would be suicide,” Kingsley said dismissively. “You’re not thinking clearly, Lupin. Your emotion for the boy is blinding you to reason.”

“And yet we must do something,” Dumbledore said. “I will not leave Harry to death or worse in those mountains.”

Trask growled in frustration. “Where does that leave us?”

“There was a report a few weeks ago about increased vampire activity in the mountains,” Kingsley said, thinking back. “Do you think Potter could have had something to do with it?”

“More than likely,” Dumbledore sighed. “If the vampires have him it is for a reason....”

Remus shuddered. “Let’s just pray he hasn’t been bitten.”

“Sod this,” Dermas decided, slapping the table and standing up. “We’ll approach them, ask for his release, and then negotiate. There’s something we’re missing, I think, but that’s what we’ll do.”

Dumbledore was silent for a few moments in contemplation, weighing up the odds for and against. In the end it was that simple – there was no other choice. The combined forces of all the Ministry Aurors could not break that mountain fortress. *And I’ll not leave him in there a minute longer than necessary...* No, Harry was getting out of there tonight.

“Prepare the Aurors, Kingsley, Dermas – Remus and I will gather the Order. We leave for the Carpathian Mountains in one hour.”

The tunnels were cold and damp but Harry had no trouble seeing. His eyes shone in the darkness, faintly with a blue radiance and it was as clear as day to him. He coughed once or twice from the sickness and he was shaky upon his legs, but other than that he descended with ease deeper into the vampire stronghold.

His mind was clear, calm, in control. He remembered everything, even why he had forgotten in the first place. Jumping into his sixteen year old self... it had destroyed his mind. The Guardian had given him a chance to sort it all out, and his mind had done just that. Fixed the memories in place and now they flowed smoothly, into his mind – like an organised filing cabinet.

Strangely, and he thought that he knew why, his memories of the last few months in his own world – in this world – before *everything* had happened, were the clearest. Perhaps because he was sixteen again and, technically, had never left this world. Whatever, the why did not

matter, not if it worked in his favour.

Despite his illnesses, his near nakedness and his pains, Harry still moved without a sound swiftly downwards into the mountain. He had learnt many means to hide himself over the long years, and now it was just second nature to disappear into shadows or less.

Why do you think I'm still here? Ethan asked in his mind.

Harry wasn't sure. *I don't know... I kept some things in the change over, like the sword in my arm and you – and my magic, of course. I lost my trunk and belongings though. I was hoping to show my friends some of the crap I collect—*

What?

Harry came to a stop in the corridor and stood staring at nothing. He was crying again, weeping silently, and shaking. *I'm going to see them again after so long*, he told Ethan. *After so much time... they're only half a world away.*

I... I'm happy for you, Ethan managed.

Harry blinked, surprised. *Thanks....*

Suddenly there was a screeching ahead of him, and before Harry did anything else he ducked, instinctively knowing from years of war that something wasn't right. In the dim light of the torches on the uneven rock walls, he saw a thin line of what could have been piano wire slice through the air where his neck had been seconds ago.

"Hmm...." he mused, and lit up the tunnel with his power. It seemed his escape had been noticed.

"Darkslayer...." came the familiar cry of a dark creature. Harry knew it well – had heard it from hundreds of doomed and damned souls across existence.

Lightning burst from his palms and began striking anything that moved in this tunnel, which was over a mile long. Harry walked slowly, only one palm glowing before him, and saw, after an endless screeching, only

one vampire die. He had killed dozens though.

Further down into the mountain, within vast halls and secret tunnels, a loud wailing began to emanate as the vampires, thousands of them, were roused and furious. Harry grinned again, madness flashing in his eyes.

"The game is afoot," he laughed into the darkness. "DO YOUR WORST!" His bellow, magically amplified, shook the walls and reverberated down into the heart of the mountain fortress.

He could have Apparated to safety, or even to the battle he was walking towards down below, but he wanted this to be slow – wanted these dark creatures to suffer like they had made him suffer. Harry was angry, but displayed infinite calm. And yet, he would *melt* this mountain to destroy the creatures that infested it

Up ahead he could hear screeching and wailing, crashing and burning, fear and hate. Clenching his glowing hands, Harry gritted his teeth and walked with absolutely no fear to meet it. Whatever happened, he was going home today.

Half an hour later

"Are you ready, Remus?" Dumbledore asked, placing a Portkey in the werewolf's hands.

Remus nodded and looked around at the forty or so people gathered in the Auror Headquarters just outside of Hogwarts and the recently rebuilt Hogsmeade. Twenty four Aurors and sixteen members of the Order that could be gathered on such short notice. There were the eldest Weasley son's, Bill and Charlie, that he could see – and Tonks.

Remus grasped the stone in his hand – they would all be portkeying to the entrance of the vampire mountain, a dark place if the stories were true.

"As ready as I'll ever be, Albus," Remus said, thinking that he would die tonight if they did not get Harry, and that he still had to take his potion.

“Very well, my friend, let’s go.”

Dermas strode over to them, hand on his sword hilt. “I don’t like this,” he said, scratching at the stubble on his cheeks. “Not at all... but everyone here is prepared to die for Harry. They’ve all been informed of the situation.”

“What do they think about it?” Remus asked.

Dermas laughed. “They think its crazy, but worth it. Let’s just get it over with.”

And so they went.

Whether by Apparation or Portkeys they went. For each one of the forty the world blinked in a moment, went from calm cool stone, before becoming a scene from their worst nightmares. Twilight had descended upon the Carpathian Mountains when the force sent to rescue Harry arrived there, one and a half hours after the tracking device had gone off.

Chaos met Remus Lupin’s eyes. They stood on a ridge looking across to a large mountain and before that, roughly one hundred metres away, stood a gaping mouth in the stonework, the ground entrance into the vampire’s lair. Smoke and fire were billowing from that entrance, and from a hundred different entrances dotted all over the mountain that rose into the clouds.

It was a sight to remember, and it had every member of the rescue team gaping. It looked as though, with every fire burning, that the *entire* mountain was on fire – a giant massive fire that was chewing its way through woodland and melting snow on the highest peaks.

“Dear Merlin....” Remus breathed, staggering back. The heat was extraordinary.

“BACK!” Trask roared. “GET BACK.”

Many of the Aurors, Order members, and Dumbledore were erecting heat shields and directing the smoke away from the group now, clearing the view of the mountain of fire. High in the orange sky, below the scattering clouds, hundreds if not thousands of winged shapes flew

away from the mountain.

“VAMPIRES!” more than one voice shouted, and now that Remus listened he could hear their screeches. What could have caused this?

Harry, his mind whispered. *What’s happened to Harry?*

Battling his way across the ridge to Dumbledore, Remus shielded his eyes against the white hot fire *liquefying* the mountain ahead of them. “WE HAVE TO GET TO HARRY!” he roared.

“NO!” Dumbledore replied, building an intricate shield. “DO NOT DO ANYTHING FOOLISH, REMUS!”

Fire and stone fell from the sky and struck vampires in the air a thousand feet overhead. It was amazing – what force did this? The ground was shaking, rock splitting and a white hot tongue of flame was burning constantly from the entrance up ahead. There was no way they could get any closer, and if they didn’t get away soon a mountain was going to come down on their heads.

As Remus watched the entrance, coughing and shielding his eyes against the smoke and heat, his jaw dropped as he saw a figure emerge from those flames. A bedraggled figure, yet a familiar one – shielded somehow. He was walking through the fire as if he had all the time in the world, and Remus’ heart jumped into his chest.

“HARRY!” he roared against the sound of the dying mountain and the screeching of the fleeing vampires.

Up ahead he saw the figure stop walking suddenly and meet his eyes. Recognition flittered between them for a moment, and then the boy up ahead screamed, blue light erupted from his palms, and the entire mountain exploded.

Hundreds upon thousands upon millions of tonnes of rock just blew outwards in a wave of power that disintegrated everything in its path. Fire rained from the sky, earth melted and light failed. Remus screamed – they all screamed – but they didn’t die.

Walking slowly towards the exit of the vampire lair, Harry saw daylight through the gap and sighed. He was tired, he wanted to get home. His shield deflected the smoke, flames and heat of the magical blaze he had started and sent surging through every hall and corridor in this godforsaken place. In the last hour or so, he had seen things that had made even him, with all his experience, feel sick, hidden away for centuries, and this place would burn for it.

Bodies... torture chambers... *feeding* tunnels. Tragic, hideous, gut wrenching. Such a thing would not exist on his world, he would see to it that it didn't.

A surge of white fire, so hot that it melted stone, blazed passed him and lit up the gaping exit like a candle. He walked in this flame, his shield protecting him like it had done thousands of times over the years.

He had not seen the monster he was looking for. He had reached the room Masorn had questioned him in, but the vampire leader had fled – it was a problem for another time. No vampire would be coming back here, he had seen to that. This place was entirely evil, completely and utterly for miles around. In a few minutes all that evil would be dust, and life would have a chance again in this part of the world.

The pressure of his fire and magic in the stone was building. This mountain was the heart of the vampiric empire, when it exploded it would destroy *their* world. Harry felt no remorse or pity, in fact he felt rightly satisfied. It was for the greater good, and they had hurt him. It was also for revenge.

Even through his shield the ground felt hot beneath his bare feet, and Harry decided it was time to leave. His shield could stand up to this mountain exploding, had stood up to more in the past... or the future... or what could have been the past and future, depending on which way he looked at it – but he was eager to get home to his friends.

So much time, so long and hard the road had been. He wanted no more battles for now, no more fights or plans for war – he wanted to abandon all of that for a time, and just rekindle old friendships with the only people he had ever cared for, and who he had ever let care for him.

Harry wavered on the spot, feeling woozy as he stepped out of the flame and onto the mountainside, at the foot of a valley opposite a ridge. He thought that maybe he had overdone it – too much magic too soon, but he was all right for now. Any second the mountain would explode, and he wanted to be around to see it.

Overhead, he watched hundreds of the foul creatures fleeing for their lives – another problem for another time.

It was then, as he exited the tunnel into the twilight world, that a long forgotten voice rang clear through the sounds of destruction and the haze of smoke and falling debris.

“HARRY!”

Harry jerked his head up fast and came to a startled stop as he recognised Remus Lupin, his Remus Lupin, alive and no more than one hundred metres away. In the space between seconds, he recognised others as well. Weasley’s, Aurors, Dumbledore, Tonks, Dermas Trask. They were here. His face broke out into grin, but then he remembered the time bomb they were all sitting on, and he cursed wildly.

“SHIT!” he cursed, flinging his arm forward with a string of power just as the mountain reached its breaking point, and exploded in a hellish firestorm of rebirth and renewal.

Racing just ahead of the destruction, faster than sound as it cracked the air, Harry’s string of blue power split and formed a half sphere around the dozens of people who had come, it seemed, to rescue him.

This drained Harry, on top of everything else. He was ill, dying he knew, and weak. He hadn’t used his magic in months, and now all of this at once. Inside of the wall of fire, mere millimetres of shield separated him from death, as he kept his arm stretched forward towards the other shield, and his friends.

I did NOT fight through all hell just to kill them all over again, he told himself as the magic began to sink back in on itself, leaving smooth cut rock in its wake, receding down back to the source in the remains of the mountain.

It went on for minutes that felt like hours, but eventually Harry looked up, smoke rising from his body in tendrils, to see that his shields had held, that his muscles were quivering, and that everyone who should still be alive was. With a sigh of relief he released them both and staggered back onto his feet.

Behind him there had once been a mountain – now there was only a smoking crater and beyond that eastern peaks of other, vampire-free mountains. There was no debris, no falling rock or superheated ground. The mountain had, simply, been disintegrated to something less than dust.

The explosion still rang in Harry's ears as he stumbled towards the forty people waiting to greet him up ahead. They stood still, staring at him silently, questioningly. They probably didn't want to believe that he had done this – he wouldn't tell them one way or the other. Let them think on it... he was...

My adventures outside of this world are done!

Harry swatted away dots before his eyes as he walked, and began to think about, of all things, the weird fruit he had eaten in that world of the demons – Tarishma's world. The apples that were shaped like capsicums. He was fainting, losing consciousness, he had overdone it – but no one ever realises they're fainting at times like these.

He sighed, and then stood before Remus Lupin, Albus Dumbledore, Nymphadora Tonks, and Dermas Trask. He managed a small smile – he could do no more. He had fought across worlds, through heavens and hells, through time itself to make it this far, and there were no words or thoughts that could properly describe his feelings at that one moment.

"Harry....?" Remus Lupin whispered slowly. It looked like Harry before them, but only just. He was filthy, his glasses were missing and there was more than a spot of blood covering him.

"Hello, Remus," Harry managed, swaying on the spot now. In contrast to the maelstrom of fire and destruction of just a few minute ago, the land was now calm and a soft breeze surrounded them. "Hello, all of you.... It's... er... Well, let's just say it has been *awhile*."

Harry grinned, laughed once, and then his eyes rolled up into the back of his head and he passed out. On top of his infections and illnesses, he had used too much magic too soon. He should have expected this.

There was a coppery feel and *taste* in the air as Remus knelt down to catch Harry in his arms before he fell. His eyes fell over the multitude of scars and burns he hadn't carried when he went missing and he gazed at his best friend's son in horror and pain.

What the hell has happened to him? he wondered. "Dumbledore, we have to get him out of here. We have to get him home, he's dying!"

Whether he lived or died it didn't matter, the body count before all was said and done was going to be astronomical either way.

Chapter 5 – End of Nightmares

*For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed;
the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does
not
cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we
are
responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have. The
sea rises,
the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The
moment
we cease to hold each other, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.*

~~ James Baldwin

"What will you do if you actually make it home one day?" Ethan asked, leaning against a tree on the other side of the campfire. They stood upon

a barren world following, as ever, the golden scar link.

"I don't know," Harry replied, chewing on a piece of salted meat. He gazed into the flickering flames idly. "I really don't."

"What do you want to do?"

Harry smiled. "Apologise to my friends."

"For what?"

Harry shook his head and lay down on his bedroll, gazing up at the stars now. He was getting old, he knew, approaching sixty five. "I was... I was never the friend I should have been," he began awkwardly. "Ron, Hermione and Ginny were... always there, always understanding. I was angry, distant, and cruel at times. They didn't deserve that."

Ethan nodded. "Not many people get a second chance, you know," he said.

Harry shrugged. "Not many people are me."

May 21st

Shifting on something soft, Harry frowned and rolled over, opening his eyes slowly and carefully. His mind was awash with weird dreams and thoughts and he couldn't remember just now what he had done to be brought here – wherever here was. A bed, a comfy fluffy feather bed.

Not that comfy though – he had spent more nights under the stars than he cared to remember, and found it odd sleeping in a normal bed.

Drifting in and out of sleep, he rubbed his cheeks and kept opening and closing his eyes, trying to grow use to the sparkling sunlight streaming in through the window in the ornate gilded frame. He turned to look at the wall on his right and saw an empty picture frame which was very, very familiar....

Memory came crashing down like a tonne of bricks and Harry screamed, jumping up in his bed. Grimmauld Place, he was in Grimmauld Place

after so long. Before he knew it tears sprung from his eyes and his weak arms gave way beneath him. He fell back down onto the comfy bed laughing and crying uncontrollably.

The door burst open and friendly, almost forgotten, faces ran in full of concern. Madam Pomfrey was there, Dumbledore followed her, then came Tonks and finally Severus Snape. Well, three out of four wasn't too bad, he thought.

"Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey exclaimed, gliding over and placing her hand against his forehead. "How do you feel?"

Harry smiled and wiped his eyes. "Never better...." he croaked. "It is good to see you again, Madam Pomfrey."

Her stern expression softened slightly. "And you, Mr. Potter. Here, drink this." She removed a potion vial from the front of her apron and lifted his head, pouring the concoction into him.

Harry coughed. It tasted terrible. "God... what was that?"

"A restorative," she said simply. "You'll be taking them for days yet."

Harry snorted. "We'll see about that," he told her, laughing again.

Tonks, purple hair and green eyes, moved up along the other side of his bed and scuffed up his hair with her hand. "Good to see you haven't lost your sense of humour, Harry," she smiled.

"You had a chest infection, more than one, and were mentally and physically exhausted, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey continued. "For a time we didn't think you'd make it, but it seems you still carry your knack for survival."

Harry nodded. "Well... well it is good to be back after...."

"After what, Harry?" Albus Dumbledore spoke for the first time, standing at the end of the bed. "Where have you been for the last two months?"

Harry stared at him for a long moment. He was the same, right down to the beard tucked into his waist belt. Colourful robes, twinkling eyes behind half-moon spectacles. It was Dumbledore. *Should I tell them?* he

mused, now that it had come down to it. *Would they believe me?*

“One prison or another,” he said finally. *It was true – a prison of the mind was still a prison.* “But we’ll talk about all that later... How you doing, Snape?”

“Good evening, Mr. Potter,” Snape said coolly, his arms wrapped in his dark cloak. “It is... *good* to see you well.”

Harry grinned. “You got a hug for me?”

Angry red blotches appeared in Snape’s cheeks but he held his tongue, looking at Dumbledore who was suppressing his own smile. “It is really good to see you alive, Harry,” the Headmaster said. “The last two months have been hard on us all.”

Two months... I wish it were so. “How is Ginny? Ron and Hermione?” he asked. “Are they well?”

Dumbledore smiled. “They are indeed well, Harry, and have already been to see you once. They have their exams though, and will be here tomorrow. It was an effort getting them to leave, but once Madam Pomfrey assured them you were on the mend....”

Harry nodded and leaned back with a sigh, closing his eyes. “I’ve missed them,” was all he said.

“We thought you were dead, Harry,” Tonks said quietly, biting her bottom lip.

“Dead?” Harry chuckled. “No... not me. Still too many things I need to do.”

Madam Pomfrey *tsked*. “Right now you need bed rest,” she said sternly.

For once, Harry was not about to argue. He still felt awful. It hurt to blink, his arms and legs felt like deadweight, and even his bones ached. He appreciated, for the first time, just how close to death he had come. And that wasn’t good... he was too important to die.

Also, he could get use to a fluffy pillow again. “So how do I check out

now, Madam Pomfrey?" he asked the aging matron. "Healthy as a bull?"

"As the headmaster said, Mr. Potter, you are on the mend. You have been healing a lot faster than expected. A week or so should see you back on your feet and well enough for the summer break."

"Summer break..." Harry sighed, still with his eyes closed. "That'll give me a chance to catch up with everyone...."

"You will be staying here, for the time being, Harry," Dumbledore said. "It is the safest place for now – what with the war heating up again and—"

"Voldemort," Harry said calmly, opening his eyes and staring at the ceiling. "Voldemort...."

"Whatever you and the Dark Lord did on the 20th of March, Potter," Snape spat, "it has made him infinitely stronger. He can destroy with a thought, torture with a click of his fingers. He can scorch land for miles around with a wave of his hand—"

"Can he pat his head and rub his stomach at the same time?" Harry asked, not at all fazed. He and Voldemort were on equal power levels now, perhaps, but Harry had had his longer. He owned the upper hand, the experience, the will....

"Let's not talk about this now," Dumbledore said, clearing his throat. Harry saw that Tonks was covering her mouth with her hand, obviously hiding a smile. "We have your safety to think of, Harry. I'm afraid it may be awhile before you can leave Headquarters."

Harry nodded, as if accepting that. "We'll talk about *that* later as well," he told Dumbledore. "I... I don't suppose Remus is here, is he? I'd like to see him."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "He has gone to the Ministry werewolf cells for the full moon, which is in a few hours. You'll be able to see him tomorrow."

All four watched for Harry's reaction, and all four saw his eyes darken and his face set in a grim, determined frown. He sat up in the bed, and before anyone could stop him, threw the covers aside and stepped onto

the plush carpet.

“Mr. Potter!” Madam Pomfrey exclaimed. “You cannot—”

“I must,” he said, pushing away her arms as she tried to force him back into the bed. “Please do not try to stop me.”

Something in his voice must have made her agree, or scared the matron, because she paled and looked to Dumbledore for help. He was frowning in concern and looked pensive for a moment and then said,

“You should remain in bed, Harry.”

Harry didn’t listen. He looked down himself and saw that he was wearing just pinstriped pyjamas, standing Hogwarts hospital issue. Grimacing, he flicked his hand and transfigured them into jeans and a black short sleeve shirt. He felt better already, wearing what he was used to.

Tonks whistled low. “That’s some nice transfiguration,” she commented. Harry turned and winked at her.

He then took a deep breath, standing as steadily as he could, and looked at Snape. “Sn...” he began. “Professor Snape, I need potion ingredients – and a cauldron, now.”

Snape’s eyebrows rose. “And why, Potter, should I help you now? You need rest, fool. You’re no good to our world dead.”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair, feeling that it had been washed and was sticking up at all angles again. He almost went to stroke his long white beard, but then remembered that he didn’t have one anymore. This would take some getting used to.

“Professor Dumbledore,” he said next. “Please, I can help Remus with his... em... werewolf problem.”

He was, of course, thinking of all the knowledge he had gained at the Ways of Twilight – time did not pass there, age did not matter. He had spent weeks, or maybe even years, behind the door that had said, **Knowledge**, and now he knew... things.

“What do you mean, Harry?” Dumbledore said warily.

Harry did not have time for this, not if the full moon was in a few hours. It would take a good three hours just for the potion.... "I can cure him," he whispered, and everyone in the room fell silent and just simply stared at him.

"Oh really, Potter," Snape began after the shock had left, "have you lost your mind? Did you learn this as a prisoner? Or was it a dream? A flight of your arrogant imagination perhaps? There is no cure for lycanthropy."

Harry clenched his fists and bit back on a quick retort. He would need the man's help. "Help me, please, or I'll Apparate out of here and do it myself."

Dumbledore was already shaking his head. "You cannot Apparate out of this house, only within it, I'm afraid. Please, Harry, get back in bed and tell us what you know."

Harry was losing his patience fast. He gently pushed forward with his mind and felt the wards on the house, specifically those effecting Apparation. He almost snorted at their simplicity – he could Apparate across continents from here with no problems.

I don't think they'll listen, Harry, Ethan sighed. Do it your way.

I have to make them trust me, he told Ethan. I can't go breaking all the rules again now – that part of my life is over. I want nothing more to do with other worlds or power struggles on different plains of existence!

Ethan laughed bitterly. *When, in all the long years, has what you wanted mattered?*

"Are you okay, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, and Harry snapped out of his thoughts. For a moment it had seemed he was talking with someone.... "You looked far away, for a moment then."

Harry shrugged. "Just glad to be home," he said. "It felt like a lot longer than two months."

"What is this about a cure for- for Remus?" Tonks asked. "Are you serious?"

Harry nodded, spinning on the spot to stare at her. "I can't tell you how I know but I do, and every minute now is one more minute Remus has to be a dark creature – something I swore I would destroy. I'm going to destroy his...."

Snape and Dumbledore watched Harry's face harden into something... defiant, and both resisted the urge to take a step back.

Everyone else was looking to Dumbledore for a response, for what to do. By all rights Harry shouldn't even be standing, and yet he was – and promising great things. "If this is true, Mr. Potter," he said. "We are going to need to have a long talk about where you gained this knowledge."

"Albus," Snape began incredulously, "surely you do not believe that he is telling the truth!?"

"I do, Severus," Dumbledore said, looking at Harry and not blinking. There was a story here, he knew, a great story. *What has he been doing?* "Please... please assist him."

Harry threw up his hands in relief. "Someone sees the light," he breathed. "Okay, Severus, to begin with we need powdered dragon's claw, fresh wolf blood, stewed horned slugs, hellebore – if you've got it – if not then aconite, and finally a six-pack of Butterbeer."

Snape was listing all of the ingredients in his head, trying to make sense of them. None of them worked well together, he knew, was Potter just being a moron? He would not put it past a Potter. "Butterbeer?" he asked, scowling.

Harry smiled wryly. "I'm thirsty."

Snape continued to scowl. "Your arrogance continues to astound me," he said.

To his surprise Harry laughed, turning away and stumbling over to the window. Snape heard him mumble... "It is good to be back."

"You have all that, potions master?" Harry called, gazing out at London. It had been many years since he had seen a city. Those last few worlds he had been on were primitive, empty, broken. "Or should I write it

down?”

“If there is more tell me now, Potter,” Snape practically hissed through his teeth. “I will also be expecting reimbursement for some of the rarer ingredients.”

Harry nodded and, with a thought, summoned a piece of parchment and quill and ink from the writing desk across the room. A few minutes later he finished writing and handed the parchment to Snape. The man’s eyes widened at the ingredients on the list.

“Bicorn *skin*... Erumpent fluid... you are mad, Potter....”

“The cauldron doesn’t need to be big,” Harry said, turning around again with his hands behind his back. “This potion will only work for Remus tonight.”

Harry felt Snape scowl at him before he left the room, and when he had gone he heaved a sigh of relief. “I’d forgotten how much work than man could be....” he whispered, speaking to Ethan – Dumbledore replied though.

“While Severus is gone,” Albus said, “you might want to get back into bed and wait, Harry. You are not fit to be on your feet.”

Harry waved his hand dismissively, but did sit back down on the bed. He gazed at the floor for a moment and sighed again, tears welling in his eyes. He was so glad to be home. When you work for a lifetime to achieve a goal, and then finally reach that goal... there were no words.

“Molly won’t be happy if she finds you out of bed, Harry,” Tonks said with a grin. “She’s been telling anyone that will listen that you’re way too thin, and that you need a long rest.”

Harry smiled kindly. “No time for resting,” he sighed. “Too much to do, too little time to do it in.”

“You have to do nothing but rest, Mr. Potter,” Madam Pomfrey scowled. “It seems that I only ever heal you so you can go out and get injured again – well not this time. You’re not leaving this room for at least two days, and you’re going to drink all of the potions I’ve had prepared.”

Harry just nodded. "I'll drink the potions," he said, unable to stop himself grimacing, "but now that I'm back I want to work on preparing this world for the war we know is coming."

What about the war being fought outside of this world? Ethan asked, and Harry could feel him smiling. *You want them to tear apart the Boundary or worse?*

Not my problem, Harry replied. *Existence existed for long enough before I started meddling – it doesn't need me.*

"I think that's best left to us, Harry," Dumbledore said gently. "You have your holidays to look forward to."

Several hours later and Harry was still in his room, but on a table Dumbledore had conjured a cauldron now bubbled viciously, and thick purple fumes were directed out through the open window into the night sky. Harry looked out of the window for just a moment at the night sky, with its full moon.

"That is forty five minutes," Snape said, and stirred the concoction, his hair and face greasy from the making of it. "What now, Potter?"

Harry cracked his knuckles and thought for a moment. "Silver," he said, taking a sip of butterbeer. Tonks had dug some out of the pantry an hour or so ago. "We need silver."

"Do I need to remind you that silver is fatal to a werewolf, Potter?" Snape snapped.

Before he said anymore, Harry disappeared from the room and dashed down through the almost empty house and into the kitchen. Dumbledore and Tonks were there, as was Mundungus Fletcher and a few others. Harry nodded and waved, before reaching into the cabinets for one of those fancy Black family silver dining plates.

To his relief he found one, thankful that Mundungus hadn't nicked them, and darted from the kitchen again without a word – leaving behind a few stunned and somewhat expectant faces.

"Should he be running?" he heard Tonks say before dashing back up the

stairs.

Back in his room, Harry channelled some magic into the plate and broke off a fair portion of it, casting that aside and dumping what was left into the bubbling cauldron.

"I cannot see how this will work, Potter," Snape sighed.

Harry stared into the concoction. "Just watch...." he mumbled.

Snape had had enough. The potion was dead, he knew, none of the ingredients reacting anymore at this heat. It had been folly to even try; he would make sure Potter paid him for his spent ingredients.

"Now," Harry said.

Snape stumbled back as, without warning, the purple brew burst with light so pure that he had to shield his eyes. It died down a moment later, as Harry extinguished the flames, and began laughing triumphantly. Snape blinked a few times to clear his vision.

"Just like the book said it would," Potter was saying to himself. "We need something to put it in."

Still a bit dazed but regaining his icy composure, Snape produced a thick vial container from within the bag he had brought back from his potion stores at Hogwarts. He passed it to Potter without saying a word. Careful not to touch any of it, Harry filled the glass container with about half a litre of the potion. Faintly, it still glowed with a fine white radiance. He waited as Snape handed him the thick cork and then stoppered the large vial.

"This... this will cure lycanthropy?" he asked quietly.

Harry looked up from the potion and met Snape's eyes. "Couldn't have done it without you, Severus," he said with a grin.

Snape grit his teeth. "That's Professor Snape to you, Potter."

Harry shrugged. "Whatever."

Then, with another burst of laughter, he Disapparated with a pop. Snape

cursed and instantly flew down the stairs, looking for the Headmaster, or for Potter. Something, he did not know what, told the potions master that he just Apparated through the wards. It would be just like him.

Still cursing, Snape ran into the kitchen.

Harry had to close his eyes and wait for a dizzy spell to pass before he stepped off the Apparation pads in the Ministry atrium. He tucked the potion under his left arm and walked barefoot across the crowded atrium towards the golden grilled elevators across the room.

He saw recognition flare in a few of the pairs of eyes around the room, but mostly his face was just another in the crowd. Aurors were lining the walls and stood guard on the elevators, so Harry did his best to just blend into the crowd for now – he needed to find the werewolf holding cells.

Concentrating, he could feel the dark creatures in the building – one of the upshots of being the Darkslayer – and felt them, a fair few, to the south east and further beneath the earth. He nodded, but still didn't know how to get there... if he Apparated he might end up in a wall in such an enclosed space. There were limits to what even he could do.

Thinking about that, Harry took a good look around the Ministry atrium and realised how little it had changed, but realising that made him also realise how much *he* had changed in the one hundred years. *ONE HUNDRED!* In the time he had been gone... he wanted to weep again, but just shook his head – he had a job to do, and had long ago accepted his fate.

But how to get to the werewolf holding cells? Probably not just anybody could walk in, and he was a missing person... he should have brought Dumbledore – would have, if he didn't think the man would do all in his power to keep him at Grimmauld Place. Still, he had to find a way there...

Well, he thought pensively, glancing at the Aurors guarding the elevators, I can't just waltz up and tell him my name, ask for directions to the werewolf cells.... Harry thought for a moment and then chuckled. That is

exactly what he could do.

And he did.

Confidently, with a small smile, he walked over to the elevators, through the atrium and under the arch into the lift room. He made eye contact with a young Auror and, before the man had a chance to speak, patted him on the shoulder.

“Evening, friend,” he began. “My name’s Harry, Harry Potter, and I’m looking for Remus Lupin. He should be down in the werewolf cells tonight, so if you could just give me directions I’ll be on my way.”

The man’s eyes goggled and his mouth worked soundlessly for a few moments before he found his voice. “Harry Potter!” he managed, his eyes flickered up to his scar. “I... I thought you were dead!”

Harry laughed. “You’re not the first person to tell me that today,” he said. “I’m trying not to take it personally....”

The man seemed incapable of speech again, and everyone nearby had heard and was staring in equal shock and awe. Feeling the weight of the potion under his arm, Harry wanted to get down to Remus quickly. He didn’t deserve to be a wolf any longer than necessary.

“Harry!”

Harry turned, recognising that voice in the back of his mind. He frowned for a moment, looking for the source, but then another smile spread across his face. “Derms Trask,” he said, stepping across the tiled floor and shaking the hand of the blade master.

“What the hell are you doing here, kid?” Trask asked, forgetting the hand and throwing his arms around Harry in a companionable hug. “Dumbledore will be pissed!”

Harry chuckled. “I expect he’ll be here any moment – let’s go.” Harry led him into the elevators, slamming the grille down. “I need to get to the werewolf holding cells.”

Trask was smiling in spite of himself. “You don’t seem to have changed a

bit,” he said, laughing. “Still breaking the rules.”

“Really?” Harry asked. “Hmm... no matter, what floor are the holding cells on?”

“Nine,” Trask said before thinking. “Shi— why do you want to go down there?”

Harry had already pressed the button and they were soon whirling down through the floors, the automated elevator voice wishing them pleasant days and voicing the floor numbers. Halfway down a few people got in and then off a floor later.

“I can cure Remus of the werewolf disease,” Harry said, balancing on the balls of his feet. “I can do so much now...”

Trask was silent for a moment, rubbing his stubbly cheek slowly, touching his scar there. “You... em... you take one too many blows to the head, Harry?”

Harry didn’t answer, he was thinking back to what he knew of level nine in the Ministry. There were only two doors on that level – one to Courtroom Ten – and the other at the end of the barren corridor that led to the Department of Mysteries. Surely they didn’t put werewolves in that place... he asked Dermas.

“On the full moon,” he said. “Another door appears just on the right as you exit the lift. It leads down into a set of cells that can’t be opened until dawn. Guess I should’ve already mentioned that – you won’t be able to get it for at least ten or so hours.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ll find a way.”

“How many times have you said that over the years?” Ethan asked, standing next to Trask. They were about the same height, the only difference was Ethan wasn’t really standing there, just projecting himself out of Harry’s mind.

Harry looked at him and shook his head. “When have I not?” he said before he could stop himself. Trask just stared at him funnily for a moment.

As Dernas had said, there was a door, an iron door, on the right when the two of them exited the elevator on level nine. Harry glanced once down the sparsely lit corridor towards the Department of Mysteries, and then turned away – he couldn't bring people back from beyond the veil, he just couldn't. He gambled with Death enough without making him even angrier.

He shivered as Dernas flicked his wand and the iron door swung inwards on its hinges, creaking across the floor. "Even if one gets out of its cell," he said, "they won't get through that door."

Harry followed Dernas now down a dank corridor that was damp, smelled stale, and lit perhaps with three torches along its length. They could hear snarling and howls up ahead. "Isn't there a guard?" he asked Trask.

Dernas looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "Would you want to be in here if one of them got loose? I know aconite – wolfsbane – helps, but it is better to be safe than sorry."

Harry shrugged.

They were walking past more iron doors now, old iron doors that were rusted and covered in dust. The floor was as well, except for a few footprints here and there. There were scratches in the walls, and two torches sprang to life as they approached. Harry saw that even though the doors were old, the plastic name tags on the door were not. He walked by four cells before he found the one that said, Remus Lupin.

Placing his hand on the door, Harry pushed and knocked once or twice. It wouldn't budge and he hadn't expected it to.

"It won't open until the sun rises," Dernas was saying. "It's magically time-locked. You'll have to wait."

Harry didn't listen. He gathered a small amount of power in his palm, which shone softly in the darkness, and grasped the old iron handle on the door. With a thought, he pushed and he felt the magical time wards stretching outwards as the door moved inwards.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dernas swear and step backwards,

reaching for his wand. Harry paid him no mind, and stepped in through the gap he had created. As soon as he let go of the door, the wards sprang back into place and the door slammed shut.

Dermas stared dumbfounded at the iron door for a moment, and then spun on his feet as he heard rushing footsteps from down the corridor, raising his wand he whispered, "*Lumos*," and his wand tip shone with light. A few moments later and Dumbledore, followed by Snape, appeared in his cone of light.

"Where is he, Dermas?" Dumbledore said quickly. "Harry—"

Trask gestured to the door that was, once again, magically time locked. There was absolutely no way to break the ward on that door... and yet Harry had... "He went in," Dermas told Dumbledore. "I don't know how he did it but he got in there."

Dumbledore and Snape paled in the light and Trask could see that neither of them knew of a way to get through those doors – not before dawn. Before he realised it, Dermas was chuckling under his breath.

Oh yes, everything was not making sense again – Harry was definitely back.

It was dark in the cell, which, as far as he could tell, was about ten feet by ten feet, and it held no fear for the Darkslayer, for The Boy Who Lived (or just wouldn't die!), for Harry Potter. He could hear slow, deep breathing in the darkness and sensed the dark creature in the room.

"Remus...." he whispered. Placing the potion vial on the floor at his feet, Harry conjured three balls of shining light and had them float across the ceiling, lighting the room. He caught sight of the wolf instantly, standing before him not three feet away.

Only years of similar dark experiences stopped Harry from flinching then. He could tell the wolfsbane was keeping the creature tame to some extent, but it could probably sense him – as the Darkslayer – and that urge might just override the potion. It bared its teeth and growled deeply in its throat.

Harry's eyes were two chips of emerald, shining in the pure light, and he felt more than saw the werewolf tense to pounce, and stepped as a blur to the side as the werewolf howled and jumped at him, hitting the iron door hard. Harry continued spinning, facing the monster that held Remus prisoner, and with a wave of his hand pushed it hard against the cell wall and held it there.

"I'm going to need some blood, werewolf," he said emotionlessly. "And then I'm going to kill you."

Its eyes spun maddeningly in its head, the black beads glowing with fire. Harry approached the monster and created a small dagger in his hand out of magic. It wasn't real, it shone with red light, and it cut through the werewolf's hide with ease. Harry slashed open its arm and red blood surged down its length.

With his mind, Harry levitated the potion over and uncorked it, placing the edge against the flow of blood. When it hit the potion, the faint white light changed to blazing silver light. *Silver...*

Harry took a step back, still holding the potion and werewolf with magic, and forced its jaws open, raising the potion before its muzzle. He hesitated before pouring it down its throat for just a moment to say,

"I'm going to eradicate your kind from this world," he said, and fully meant it. Then he tipped the potion vial and the silver potion fell into the werewolf's jaws – some went down its throat but most missed and covered its face and matted in its fur.

Grimacing, Harry released them both and the potion vial shattered on the ground as the werewolf stood tall and growled hate at him. Harry didn't move as it took a step towards him, claws scraping on the stone floor, and then hesitated....

Harry smiled darkly, it didn't reach his eyes, as the creature fell to the floor and began to writhe in pain – he felt sorry for Remus, surely, but this had to be done. Silver beads of light began to pull themselves clean of the fast changing form, hovering in the air above the creature's disintegrating flesh – it was the poison of the werewolf.

It took less time than he had estimated, and left a shaking and naked Remus Lupin on the ground weeping softly. Above him a sphere of silver light still hung, and when Harry blinked that burst into flame and fell to the floor as dust. He knelt down next to Remus, who was looking up at him now with faint recognition.

“Hello, Harry,” he managed, his bloodshot yellow eyes fading to white for the last time. “Is it morning already?”

Harry looked around the cell and noticed a tattered pair of robes lying in one corner. They would have been expensive before the werewolf got its teeth into them, as Remus did have money – from Sirius. With a few muttered words Harry repaired them and summoned them over.

“It is not even midnight yet,” Harry said softly, as Remus rose and pulled on his robes. They slipped down over his head and dark, suspicious eyes fell on Harry’s.

“That’s... that’s not possible.”

Harry was jumping inside with the emotion and excitement of meeting yet another long lost face. He hadn’t felt this emotional in years, not for decades. “Come on,” he said, throwing an arm around Remus’ shoulders. “Dumbledore’s probably outside, and then we can go celebrate.”

Remus was shaking. “Celebrate... celebrate what?”

“You’re well, my friend. You’re cured.”

There was nothing but truth and honesty in Harry’s voice, and Remus did feel as if a great weight – something he had forgotten he carried – had been lifted off his shoulders. He was weeping against Harry’s shoulder before he remembered anything else, and when he looked up it was to meet the sparkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore.

“Albus....” he whispered. “Am I dreaming?”

“I would say you have just awoken from a nightmare, Remus,” the headmaster said, glancing sideways at Harry. “You are cured.”

Remus wept again, and Harry continued to hold him up, silently looking to Dermal and Snape, before meeting Dumbledore's gaze. It spoke volumes... they would discuss this, and everything else later – much later hopefully. Harry felt dizzy as they exited the tunnels, but satisfied. He also felt hungry.

You've started something today, Ethan said in his mind as they approached the elevator. No matter what you do Harry, you bring change. I think the war you're trying to avoid will come to you.

We'll see, he replied and his stomach grumbled.

"I'm an Auror now, Harry," Trask was saying. "And I've still got your sword – Godric Gryffindor's – I'll swing by tomorrow and bring it to you, if that's alright, Albus?"

Do you ever feel like someone, or something, is blocking all the exits? Forcing you towards an end you may not like.

I don't like to think about it....

"Do you want to join the Order, Dermal?" Dumbledore replied. "You will be most welcome."

Trask was shaking his head. "I'll think on it – I will, and tell you tomorrow."

Ethan coughed in Harry's mind. *Sounds like tomorrow should be interesting,* he said.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny... I want to see them now.

Wait, Ethan told him. *Get some rest. You want Dumbledore and the others to trust you? Don't go off on your own unless you must.*

"Thank you, Harry," Remus whispered. "Thank you so much."

Sitting in a chair in the highest bedroom at Grimmauld Place, Harry gazed calmly out of the window at London. He could see the Thames stretching away in the distance, the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, and

the bridge.

He remembered back to the first world he had been in after leaving his own – the one that was near-identical – and the massacre in Trafalgar Square. He had been a military commander then, in charge of his own force that fought Death Eaters and bounty hunters. Perhaps he should do something similar this time....

Sighing, he rubbed his stubbly cheeks and yawned. Here he was already making plans for war again – he wanted a break. Down below he could hear Order members bustling around and running up and down the stairs. Pretty much every ten minutes one of them came in to check on him, to make sure he was still there, but he let them do it. So what?

Before he realised it, his left hand was shaking and a lifetime of vicious memories flashed across his mind's eye. He paled and clenched his fist, slamming it against the side of his chair. He hated feeling weak, feeling fear.... all of that was over, he told himself, and there was only one world to win now.

He'd spoken with Remus this morning – the former werewolf had spent the night in the garden, gazing at the full-moon – and he was full of gratitude and love, friendship and excitement. He and Snape had been set the task by Dumbledore to create more of the potion so it could be distributed by the Ministry to all those infected with the disease.

Ethan had been right, he was changing things again.

I wonder why I haven't felt anything from Voldemort, he asked Ethan, touching his scar briefly.

Ethan sniffed. *Dear old dad? Wouldn't know, don't care – be thankful!*

It might present a problem if he is as powerful as I am, Harry continued. *He will destroy this world before dying.*

Ain't that the truth... we won't give him a chance.

I don't see a way out of this one without all out war, do you?

Harry felt Ethan shrug, and then turned back to the window, watching the

progress of an aeroplane make its way up into the sky – takeoff from Heathrow. He pinched himself – not for the first time that day – just to make sure he wasn't dreaming. There had been so many false realities and second guesses across his forgotten life, that at times now it seemed impossible that he had made it home. He just wanted to make sure.

The shaking in his hands had started up again, but it was for a different reason – and linked to the nervous/excited feeling he had in his stomach. Any minute now, his friends would be arriving from Hogwarts... any minute. Decades upon decades he had waited and now it was down to minutes...

Harry pictured a clock in his mind, a clock that had been counting down for a century and was, finally, within the last few minutes of its time. He thought he was going to be sick. Laugh, cry, he did not know what to do – and that was a first in many years.

Each time he heard a sound downstairs his heart leapt into his throat and the shakes came back. Finally it became too much, and he rose from the old chair with a sigh and walked across the room to stroke Buckbeak, the hippogriff, across its neck. Tears sparkling in his eyes, Harry recalled all of the amazing and jaw dropping animals he had seen on his... journey. It was incredible that he had made it back.

The hippogriff arched its neck under his hand and Harry smiled. "We'll get you out of here for some exercise soon," he told it. "Hagrid will probably be up with a ferret or two as well."

Walking down the stairs slowly, Harry looked over the banister and down three flights of stairs to the main corridor of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. He saw one or two members tiptoeing quietly by the portrait of Sirius's mother behind the velvet curtain. His lips quirked into a smile as he found something to help pass the time.

Down on the ground floor, Harry approached the portrait quietly and stopped when another familiar face appeared from around the corner in the kitchen, carrying a tray full of breakfast and a glass of orange juice. It was Mrs. Weasley.

“Good morning, Mrs. Weasley,” he said, and she jumped. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t sneaking off anywhere.”

Taking him by surprise, she put the tray down quickly and then practically threw herself into him, wrapping her arms tightly around him and sobbing.

“Oh, Harry, dear,” she said. “It is so good to have you back. I was just bringing you up some breakfast.”

“Thanks,” he replied, trying to forget his first urge – which was to defend himself. His palms had almost burst with blue power. “It is good to be back.”

“I didn’t believe Albus when he said the vampires had you, but it seems you managed to get out of there all right in the end.” She held him at arms length to get a good look at him, and winced at the scars on his face just beneath his eyes. “You must be starved,” she said. “Here.”

Mrs. Weasley led him over to the breakfast tray and before Harry could get a word in edgewise she had pushed a bowl of steaming porridge with honey into his hands. “You’re much too thin,” she said, fussing about his loose clothes. “And those looked slept in. Dumbledore is having Ron bring your trunk from Hogwarts so you’ll be able to change. Oh my, you are too thin. What have you been eating?”

Stirring the porridge, Harry just let her talk and stood calmly. He was surprised the portrait of Mrs. Black hadn’t gone off yet. His mind flickered back to some of the things he had eaten to survive along the... journey... and he shivered. Porridge was good and he’d not think about the other things.

“This is nice,” he said. “Thanks.”

Blowing on a spoonful of the porridge, Harry leaned against the wall and stared at the velvet hangings around the portrait in front of him. With a thought, he pushed them open to reveal the hideous portrait.

“Good morning, Mrs. Black,” he said calmly. Mrs. Weasley jumped and sighed when she saw the hangings open.

The woman in the portrait screamed. "KREACHER! KREACHER! YOU'VE LET MORE OF THE MUGGLE-LOVING SCUM INTO MY HOME!"

Harry continued to stir his porridge, only glancing up at the portrait occasionally. Mrs. Weasley made to close it but he shook his head slightly and she stepped back. "If I see that house elf," he said, "I'll kill it."

"YOU! THE DARK LORD WILL MAKE YOU SUFFER, BOY! YOU'LL REGRET THE DAY YOUR TRAITOROUS FATHER EVER LAID EYES ON YOUR FOUL MOTHER!"

Harry frowned and set aside his porridge. "Did you... did you feel sad when Sirius died?" he asked the painting. "Did it hurt you?"

"WHY WOULD IT?" she screamed, and more people had rushed in from the kitchen now. There was Mundungus Fletcher, Tonks and Hestia Jones. Harry recalled all of their names and faces as if he had seen them yesterday – he had, some of them, but it was more than that. "HE WAS A TRAITOR TO HIS BLOOD!"

"I didn't think so," Harry sighed regretfully. "No matter – we've grown tired of you. It is time to get you off that wall."

Something in the certain way Harry said that must have transferred into the painting's consciousness, because the woman in the frame was suddenly wary, looking like a snake that has been backed into a corner.

Harry had seen a similar expression on the faces of men and women across existence, in wars mostly, where a fool commander had backed his enemy into a corner. That was one thing he had learnt early about war – never block your enemy in. Always give them a way out, otherwise you learnt the hard way what a force with nowhere to go and nothing to lose could do. They fought as if possessed, and it usually meant defeat for the fool who had caused it.

But Harry didn't have to worry about that from this painting. She had nothing but her sharp tongue, and soon wouldn't even have that. "A permanent sticking charm," Harry mused. "Nice bit of magic."

"You cannot get me off this wall," she hissed, speaking in a deadly

whisper now.

Harry laughed and lightning flashed in his eyes. "There is nothing I cannot do," he barked, and with a wrenching motion of his hands the portrait leapt off the wall and burst into flames.

Mrs Black screamed for a time, and the onlookers watched amazed, until only a pile of ash stood at the base of the wall. A large imprint, lighter than the wall around it, remained to mark the spot where the portrait had hung. Harry calmly picked up his porridge and continued to eat in silent contemplation.

You've wanted to do that for years, Ethan said. *Well done.*

"Harry, dear," Mrs Weasley began slowly. "There is some toast and marmalade here if you're still hungry."

"Thank you," he said, and smiled again. He looked years younger when he smiled and a lot less scary. One or two of the Order members edged away back into the kitchen until only Tonks and Mrs Weasley hung back. "When... when do you think Ro—"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the front door of the house burst open and, after one hundred years, Harry's eyes fell on those he thought lost more than once across time and destiny. His eyes twitched and soul twisted at that moment, for one instant, when everything seemed to freeze.

It was Ginny who walked through the door first – *and why shouldn't it be* – Ginny who saw him first and stopped dead, blocking the doorway. Time stopped, Harry was sure, and in that one instant all his fears, all his pains, all his plans and all his duty was forgotten.

Time started again, as it has a way of doing, and Ginny was pushed through the door from behind – Ron and Hermione rushing in, followed by Dumbledore, who as levitating his old trunk.

"Where is he?" Ron exclaimed upon entering. "Where... Harry!"

In his mind, across thousands of worlds, Harry had envisioned this moment in a thousand different ways, but the real thing paled to his

imaginings. So much hell he had fought through to win this moment, so much pain and anguish and loss – and now he was at a loss for words.

Words were not needed though, and he didn't resist or strike out when first Ron, then Hermione wrapped their arms around him. Ginny followed and he collapsed under their combined weight, whilst reminding himself to breathe. Everyone looked the same, as if pulled from his thoughts. He recalled every freckle, every blemish and even the shade of their eyes perfectly.

He was led upstairs, Ron grabbing his trunk and Dumbledore making his way to the kitchen. His friends – *friends... no, family* – were speaking but he didn't hear anything. He wasn't crying, he knew, but he was barely keeping it together. Hermione and Ginny were crying but Ron was putting a brave face on things. They all looked exactly as he had left them.

The four of them entered a room somewhere in the house, Harry didn't know, and only recognised it a few minutes later because of the portrait on the wall, the empty portrait. It was his bedroom, the one he and Ron usually shared. He blinked and then Hermione and Ginny were hugging him again, sitting down on the bed.

Harry smiled; he couldn't help it, and hugged them back – just to feel them, just to make sure they were real. After so long... many tricks had been played by other beings before, and he was wary, but they were real. This was all real, he was home! He wanted to groan, shout, scream with the relief.

The nightmare was over....

"We knew you were alive!" Hermione was saying, the first words he could truly hear and understand. "We never gave up hope."

Harry nodded, looking tired but happy, and held her hand, held Ginny's hand. Ron was eating a chocolate frog on the bed opposite him. *Ron was! Ron!* Really Ron. "It really is good to see you back, mate," he said. "The last two months have been naff."

Harry chuckled. "It was too long," he said. "Merlin, was it long...."

Sometime later, Harry didn't know – he had realised that time slipping could take place both when he was extremely happy or emotional, and when he was near death on a vampire prison ledge – he lay down on the bed with his head on the pillow and Ginny was there next to him, lying in the crook of his arm with her head against his shoulder.

In a century, Harry never had a happier memory than just now.

It was early afternoon outside, and sunlight streamed in through the window and made Ginny's hair shine. They just sat silently, happy in one another's arms. It had been too long. Harry could feel her heartbeat against his chest, she could feel his – all of it had been worth it for this one moment.

Blinking, Harry became more aware of his surroundings, and asked quietly, "Where did Ron and Hermione go?"

Ginny sighed, her breath was warm against his neck. "Hermione pushed him out of here about an hour ago, don't you remember? They went for some lunch... and to give us time to talk alone."

Harry nodded, he did remember. "I don't think we've done much talking yet," he said. "Well... em... how've you been?"

Completely the wrong thing to say, he knew, but it was all he had. Surprisingly, she chuckled. "Oh, Harry, you don't know how good it feels to have you back – you were gone so long."

Harry smiled down at her when she twisted her head to look up at him. Her right leg was tangled up in his left, his barefoot touching her shoe. They were together; a hundred years could not keep them apart.

"I was," he agreed, his voice wavering. "Too long. I'm so sorry."

"You've nothing to be sorry for," she sighed, sitting up and looking down at him.

"I have worlds to be sorry for," he whispered, brushing a strand of her smooth hair back behind her ear. "You're really there...."

Ginny smiled and laughed, linking her hand in his. "I am, Harry. I don't

think I can even begin to imagine what you've been through, but it's done with now."

Harry nodded fiercely and his eyes hardened in that dangerous way that they do. "You're right, I'm staying here."

Ginny grinned. "Here, I kept this for you, just like you asked." She reached into the front of her robes behind her neck and Harry caught the glint of a gold necklace.

"What?" he asked.

"You said, you said you'd be back before V-Voldemort was, and you are. You gave me your ring, that I gave you, as a promise that you would be back." As Ginny spoke she removed the necklace and Harry saw looped on it a familiar looking silver circle of metal. His ring, he remembered.

Ginny gently slipped it onto the index finger of his left hand and twisted it around. It fit as if he had always worn it and she smiled contently. Harry raised his hand before his face to look at it, felt the time he knew had separated the both of them, all the years and war, and realised, for the first time really, just how... *large* everything he had done had been.

A nightmare... that had ended? He prayed that it had.

Putting that ring on his finger, Ginny had completed a circle started one hundred years ago, and now it was all laid to rest. It was done!

Harry was crying before he remembered anything else, and Ginny was holding him close, whispering kind words and wiping his cheeks with her sleeve. His tears were long, soul wrenching sobs that he didn't think he had in him anymore.

Perhaps I'm more human than they all think, he thought.

"It was so long, Gin, so hard... I didn't think I'd ever make it back here...."

"You're home now, Harry," she said soothingly. "Home. Nothing else matters. You can just forget the last two months."

Oh, how can I tell them, tell her? I never can... I can't... I shouldn't... What do I do?

She smelled of roses, he realised, once he had dried his eyes. Ginny, her scent was of roses – in her hair. What did that mean? He didn't want it to mean anything. He had left all of that behind. Roses, other worlds, different levels of reality, Death and Evil... he was done.

Are you? Ethan asked. *Are you really?*

"I have an exam tomorrow and two next week," Ginny whispered against his ear. "But other than that I'll be here, and we can catch up. You should see the DA, Harry! We've done wonders with it."

Don't count yourself out of the Game just yet, Potter, Ethan continued. *Your dreams, they're of the Destroyers, the Guardians, all of that! You've pissed too many people off to just walk away.*

"That's good," Harry said. "That's really good."

Voldemort! Voldemort is my only concern! Harry replied, angry with himself and Ethan.

What if Existence and Voldemort are one and the same this time?

"We've got our holidays ahead of us," Ginny continued. "Eight weeks off. You are coming back to Hogwarts for your seventh year, aren't you?" she asked nervously.

Harry honestly hadn't thought about it. He didn't need to, at all – not for a magical education. But his friends and everyone he cared about would be there. "I don't know what's going to happen," he told Ginny. "Time will tell."

Time always did.

[Chapter 6 – We All Dream](#)

Hope is the pillar that holds up the world. Hope is the dream of a waking man.

~~Elder

Lord Voldemort did not need to breathe anymore – he was less, and in some cases more, than human. The power inside of him, the seething, writhing, awesome power, kept him *alive*, if there was such a thing for the monster anymore.

The Dark Lord thought back to the day he had nearly defeated his mortal enemy, Harry Potter, the day he had been defeated instead – and had been reborn, yet again, as a god. Hours of thought he had given it, and still he failed to understand how the magic had been transferred from Potter and into him.

It had *latched* onto his already extraordinary amount of power, latched on and had begun to grow at an unbelievable rate. He could shatter this world now. Voldemort supposed Potter possessed the same power and that his had grown as well, they were linked on more than one level after all – and that could be the key.

Frost had developed on the walls of his chamber in Slytherin Fortress – frost formed wherever he walked, flames flickered out and died, and the very air seemed to darken. That always made him smile and his eyes shine with fire.

Before the Dark Lord, kneeling in submission, was the so-called King of the Vampires. Lord Masorn, a monster who had lived for millennia and led his kind into hiding, into cowardice and now, it seemed, destruction at the hands of a man called the Darkslayer.

Masorn's chest still burned with the glowing serpent and skull, the Dark Mark, as did the chests of his followers. Voldemort had learnt little of what had happened in the Carpathian Mountains, but he had his suspicions as to the identity of this 'Darkslayer'. Only one other possessed the power to do what Masorn claimed....

Still, the Darkslayer had destroyed half of the vampires that could have

been his, more than half – only fifteen hundred remained for his service now, the rest burnt to death along with their mountain home. Voldemort suppressed the surge of anger he felt, but the air turned frigid anyway.

“You kept this from me, Masorn?” the Dark Lord hissed, his words holding their own sort of compulsion, making it impossible to deny answering.

“My lord,” Masorn replied, gritting his teeth. He had probably never been made to call anyone lord in thousands of years. “The Darkslayer is a prophecy of the vampires, of Darkness itself – we did not—”

“He is Harry Potter, is he not?” Voldemort cut in calmly, a goblet of smoke appearing in his skeletal hand. “Do not lie to your master.”

Masorn’s yellow and red eyes bulged and he grimaced, swallowing his words. Instead he said, “He is... my lord. Your enemy is my enemy.”

“How... interesting....” Voldemort mused. This was interesting, especially because of the prophecy he had discovered in the demon text, which was older than Masorn himself. It had said, quite satisfyingly, that the Darkslayer would be defeated. Of course there were many interpretations of the word, but in the end it spelled good news.

*Demons from the Beginning...
Sealed for Eternity and barred from Existence
Freed against the Darkslayer once in time,
again by his greatest enemy in another.*

*Commanded by he who frees them, the demons
live in the space between universes – and are
always thirsty for blood.*

*The Darkslayer fought them once, in time,
and would do so again – so says the Prophecy.
All souls will be forfeit in their second coming,
and the Darkslayer will be defeated.*

It was interesting – even as a rough translation. Accurate enough, the Dark Lord knew. Harry Potter had apparently been very busy in the two

months since their *duel*, if the birth of a god could be called that.

Freed against him once, and then again by his greatest enemy. Voldemort counted himself as the boy's greatest enemy – he had to, with their own prophecy stating that neither of them could live while the other did.

Fought them once in time, Voldemort mused, as Masorn spouted everything he knew about the boy. *All souls will be forfeit in their second coming, and the Darkslayer will be defeated.*

It could not get much clearer than that. These demons... once Voldemort opened the way, would be commanded to destroy this world, so he could remake it. It was perfect, his plans could not fail this time – prophecy said so. And prophecy could not be changed, it was the Hand of Fate.

Still, Voldemort had always erred on the side of caution, as it were. Harry Potter had thwarted him in the past – he was the key, a pivotal part of the Light. He would have to die, and would.

“My lord,” Masorn whispered. “I took some of the Dark— of Harry Potter's hair, my lord. I thought... if he should come into his strength, or escape us, I could summon the storm demon – with your leave, my lord.”

“Storm demon....” Voldemort said. “Yes, but I will do it, Masorn. It is wise this world learns that I am still here.”

An ancient magic, not used for millennia, but well within Voldemort's power range now. To summon the very elements against Potter will certainly keep him busy and distracted from other, more sensitive, plans... like the forging of a Demon Gate into the space between worlds.

Voldemort laughed and Masorn quailed. It was too late – too late now to hope for a saviour.

We came close, you and I, to something great at the Ways of Twilight, Harry spoke to Ethan in his mind. He stood in the shower at Grimmauld Place and the warm water streaming down his body helped loosen all the aches and pains in his joints.

*You're talking about the door that said **Destiny**, aren't you? Ethan whispered, his voice clear in Harry's head. There was truth behind that door... the Truth.*

The purpose for Existence, the reason for everything. I feared it.

Harry felt Ethan shivered. *You were right too. Some truths are not meant even for you.*

I feel as if I should have done something about the poison eating away at that door – I fear we all may pay for it now.

Ethan was silent for a long moment and Harry turned off the taps, stepping out of the shower. *You... if it was meant for you, then one day you'll be back there – it seems unavoidable that something will drag you back into this power struggle over Existence. The War for Creation.*

Harry growled. *That is not my war!*

You started it! Ethan replied. Intentionally or not you were the catalyst. Will you just turn your back to an existence-wide conflict?

Stop pushing me – from now on my duty is here, to this world, and only here. I'm going to get dressed, go down to breakfast, and spend the day with my friends. Nothing more – I won't be pulled back into that other nightmare.

Ron and Hermione were sitting hand in hand at the breakfast table when he went downstairs. Ginny had to go to Hogwarts today, for her Potions OWL. Remus and Mrs. Weasley were at one end of the table, and Tonks was at the other. All of them smiled and waved him over when he entered the kitchen, hair still damp and sticking up every which way.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Tonks said as he took a seat. "Didn't think you'd ever rise."

Remus sat smiling at him and Mrs Weasley began filling a plate that had appeared before him with scrambled eggs, toast and pouring apple juice into a glass. The place had been set for him.

Harry yawned. "It's been awhile since I slept in such a comfy bed," he

said without thinking. "Didn't want to get out of it."

"Where have you been these last two months, Harry?" Ron asked. "Besides... besides the vampire thing."

"Ron," Mrs Weasley said quickly, "Harry won't want to talk about that."

"It's okay," Harry said and smiled at his best friend. "I don't remember much except waking up in that mountain... and then it exploding." It was a lie, Ron and Hermione could tell it was a lie, and that, of course, was what Harry wanted. What he really said was, *I don't want to say anything in front of the Order.*

"There, you see," Mrs Weasley said, piling more eggs onto his plate. She had paled. "Nothing to talk about – best to just put it behind you, Harry."

Harry understood how she felt – he was, if silently, a good judge of character and human emotion. He had seen a wide array of it across existence and it just made sense. Mrs Weasley didn't want to talk about it, because she considered him as one of her sons – or near enough – and what mother wanted their child to suffer? He could never tell her what had really happened. But if he told anyone... it may get back around. Full circle again.

Putting some scrambled egg between two slices of wholemeal bread, Harry started to fill in the blanks of the last two months. "So, what've you done with the DA?" he asked. "I hear good things."

Hermione beamed and Ron smiled. "Just like you wanted Harry – we've made it a real force, guardians of Hogwarts. There are patrols and practice sessions – I think everyone passed their defence exams this year – Ron and I did, anyway. It'll all be there for when you come back to Hogwarts."

Harry smiled and ate his breakfast slowly. Come back to Hogwarts.... he didn't know. On the one hand he wanted to – just to be with his friends, and on the other he did have a job to do in this war, and couldn't do that if he was considered a student still at school. He needed respect and could see no other way to get it than through fear, a display of power.

No, he told himself. Stop thinking about war! You're done for now.

“What do you want to do today, Harry?” Hermione asked, pushing away her empty breakfast plate. “I know we can’t leave headquarters but that doesn’t mean there isn’t—”

“Why can’t we leave this house?” he asked, knowing full well the answer. He directed his question towards Remus, which wasn’t very fair but then he didn’t want to be manipulated again. He was beyond that, beyond fear and the need for protection.

“Harry,” Remus began slowly. He looked a lot better now that he was cured, younger even. His hair was no longer grey, his eyes no longer haunted, and he carried himself taller. “It is simply not possible for you to leave the safety of the wards. We just got you back... we don’t want to lose you again.”

“I’ll be having words with Dumbledore about this,” Harry stated after a moment had gone by in silence. “I assume he wants to talk to me?”

“He’ll be here this evening,” Tonks piped in. “You’ve been throwing surprises at us since you woke up two days ago, kid. He wants to know what happened.”

Everyone at the table watched the slow grin spread across Harry’s face. It didn’t reach his eyes. “Does he now....” they heard him whisper. “He may find out more than he cares to know.”

Silence followed this until Hermione and Ron stood up. “Come on, Harry. Let’s go see Buckbeak.”

Harry tapped his plate with his fork and then nodded. He grabbed an apple for the trip and then followed his friends out of the kitchen and through the hall towards the stairs. “I wonder how they got that awful picture off the wall,” Hermione said in passing, and Harry hid his grin.

Up the stairs in the highest room in the house, Buckbeak’s room, sunlight filtered in through the window and the hippogriff sat lazing in it by the dusty old bed. No sooner had they sat down, Hermione in the only chair by the window, Ron on the bed and Harry on an old trunk he pulled across the floor, than the questions came.

“So,” Ron said quickly. “What really happened after you stepped into that

thing back in March?"

"We know you're hiding something, Harry," Hermione jumped in. "But you can tell us."

Harry smiled sadly and rested his chin on his calloused and slightly blistered palm. It was an after effect of wielding such awesome amounts of power. It burnt his palms. "It's a long story, and I'm not sure if I should tell it."

Hermione and Ron exchanged troubled looks. "Why?" Ron asked.

Harry sighed. "Because I lived it once, I'm not sure I could face it again. / don't want to remember, but I have to otherwise some very bad things will happen."

"You're not making much sense, Harry," Hermione whispered.

Harry's eyes glazed over as he looked out at the clear blue sky through the thin window. He saw through the sky though, through what his eyes saw and fell into memory. "Do you... do you believe there's a God?" he said before thinking.

His two friends exchanged that troubled glance again. "Where did that question come from, mate?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. "I'll have to tell Dumbledore, I think, if only to get the freedom I need to...." He trailed away and blinked, thinking back to Ron's question. "Just something I've thought about more than once over the last two mon.... since I've been gone. Never mind."

You're scaring them, Ethan whispered.

"Well, what could be so hard to tell *us*, Harry?" Hermione stressed, sunlight shining through her bushy hair.

"It's not so much telling you...." Harry began, frowning. "But... I think I'd have to show you, if you're to believe it."

Hermione blinked. "You mean in a pensieve?"

Yesterday you weren't even sure if you should tell them, Ethan said.

What has changed?

Harry shrugged and looked down at his palms with a sigh. For so long he had known what to do, what he had to do, how to do it and the cost if he failed. Now though... he was rudderless. He had a new life to lead, at least one more war to fight, and a truth that his friends deserved to know. It answered so many fundamental questions about life, whilst raising thousands more and showing, even for just a glimpse, the size of Existence.

"A pensieve...." Harry whispered. "Yes, that'll work."

Ron coughed and looked nervous for a moment. Harry just raised an eyebrow. "We've... em... got something to tell you as well, mate."

Harry listened as Ron and Hermione relayed the dreams – nightmares – they had had of him whilst he had been a prisoner of the vampires. Ginny as well, apparently. They had dreamed of him, for some reason, and Ron had even been bruised similar to him. What could it mean? Why was everything always so goddamn cryptic and difficult?

When they were done, Harry nodded. "Another piece to a puzzle I thought I'd finished...." he sighed, holding his head in his hands.

"Harry," Hermione said, trying to bring the conversation out of troubled waters, "why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

Harry chuckled. "I don't need them anymore," he smiled. "My eyesight is fine without them now. Just one of those things I'll throw in the pensieve."

So, you're telling them then... are they ready?

"Oh," Hermione replied, obviously trying to figure it out then and there. "Well, are you going to tell us how you managed to find a cure for lycanthropy?"

"In time," Harry said, trying to convince himself to go through with this – to buy a pensieve. "I ask that you're patient with me, because it will take some time."

I can't put one hundred years in there, just key events and odd happenings... it'll still take weeks.

"You sound a lot... older... than when you left," Ron commented.

I feel a lot older. "We all grow up from time to time, Ron," was all he said.

Later that day, Hermione sat reading in the large Black family library, whilst Ron and Harry played chess on a nearby table. It was an old chessboard, the pieces dignified and noble – something she would expect to see in this house.

Only just reading the book, Hermione stared over the top of it at Harry, and the new way he held himself, the way he spoke, the looks he gave. She was sure, even though she was trying her hardest to be sneaky about it, that he knew she was watching him. It was just a feeling, but he neither confirmed it nor looked her way more than once, and when he did it was just to smile.

There was something profoundly different about him, and that was more than just a feeling. Hermione knew it – could see it in his eyes when he glanced at the chessboard. He was thinking at least a dozen moves ahead, she knew, and Ron was hard pressed to keep up with him. As it stood, both of them had only taken three pieces and they had been playing for an hour.

What could have happened in just two months to change him so? she wondered. He was older, a lot older and more mature it seemed. He always seemed to be ready for... for an attack. Unaware that she was shaking her head, Hermione tried to read her book without thinking about what could have happened to someone she considered one of her closest friends. Someone she loved.

"Good move," Ron grumbled, and intercepted Harry's bishop with a pawn – sacrificing the little guy.

"Thank you," Harry replied calmly, taking the pawn. His face was impassive, seemingly indifferent. You wouldn't think they had been playing this game on such a level that it may have confounded even a chess master.

“When did you get so good at this?” Ron asked.

Harry blinked, and recalled the years he had played against a shadow in his mind, in his dreams. *We all dream.* A being he had never learnt the identity of, but suspected it to be a Destroyer, or something similarly dark. They had played chess, and Harry couldn’t remember ever winning against it. Ron, on the other hand, he had never beaten Ron either... but Harry, really for the first time, recognised just what a great strategist Ron was.

He had spent a century in and planning war, and yet he was hard pressed to beat Ron. Another thing he had learnt on his quest, he supposed it could be called a quest, was that some peoples minds were just set up to understand things better than others. Ron understood chess, could plan dozens of moves ahead – and rarely, if ever, lost.

But you’re thinking how to use him, aren’t you? Ethan whispered in a small corner of his mind. *Already, how to use him in the war that is coming.*

Maybe he is supposed to play a part – we don’t just share nightmares for nothing. Perhaps he was made for war, as I was.

And Hermione and Ginny. What parts will they play? You have your strategist... what’s left? How can you be sure you won’t kill them this time?

“I just think about my move more now,” Harry answered Ron and Ethan. “Look at it from all angles.”

“Well, you’re good,” Ron nodded. “But good enough for my sister?” he threw the question out of nowhere. Expecting Harry to jump or at least look startled, he did not expect the insufferable calm and seeming indifference on his best friend’s face.

“I love her, Ron,” Harry said simply. “At least... I remember loving her, we may have to start again.”

“What?” Ron began. “No, never mind. I didn’t mean the question as it sounded Harry. Ginny... Ginny’s free to make her own choices.”

It seems you aren't the only one who has grown up, Ethan commented.

"And I don't think, mate," Ron said as though every word was like having a tooth pulled. "That she could've chosen better than you, Harry. If it has to be someone, I'm glad it's you. Please, please just keep her out of trouble."

The last came out like a plea, a cry for understanding and Hermione sighed and moved over to sit next to Ron, linking her hand in his and leaning her head against his shoulder. She glanced at Harry once and was met with that unfaltering, emotionless face. It made her shudder. If he had been impossibly strong before, it was as if something had hardened him into unbreakable iron now. She shuddered and wondered what had happened to him.

"There is a war coming, Ron," Harry said, taking a move on the chess board. Knight to block castle and move into check. "We'll all have our parts to play. Perhaps those closer to me more than others... but I...."

Here Hermione saw him falter at least, his face now showing pain and indecision. "Go on," she urged.

Harry sighed, and what he said next shook Ron and Hermione to their very core. The way he said it, without hesitation or lack of honesty. The truth, pure and simple, that he fully believed he could do it if it came to that.... He said,

"I'd burn this world using my soul as the fire if it kept her from harm, Ron. I would – and if Voldemort knew that then this war would be over, because I wouldn't even hesitate. I can, and would, tear apart heaven and hell, reality itself, to keep her safe."

Neither Ron nor Hermione doubted him... neither would ever bet against him doing exactly that. *What had happened to him?*

Harry sat before the fire in the living room of the Order of the Phoenix headquarters, a roll of parchment resting open on his knee whilst he wrote carefully across the page. He had learnt a lot at the Ways of Twilight – a lot – and he felt that it was best he wrote down what he could

remember. Least of all there was the weapons technology.

The flames of the fire danced in his eyes as he scribbled furiously now, unrolling the parchment as he went. He didn't see the parchment, he saw through it as his mind recalled all the technology, the knowledge, he had gained. Bits were incomplete, would need more thought, but he took down the key points.

Before he realised it, he had begun planning the war in his head again. It was something he tried to avoid, for a week at least, but it just wasn't... in his programming to avoid conflict. He had survived for a century by staying one step ahead of his enemies at every moment he could, and it was hard to break the habits of a lifetime.

I'll need the Aurors, he thought, thinking and writing. They'll have to give me command without question. They won't, but I'll make them see reason. Voldemort will have his Death Eaters, uncertain how many, plus dark creatures – have to assume the worst until I know more – vampires, most likely.

"Harry!" someone called through from the kitchen. "Dinner in five minutes."

It was Ron, but Harry only just took in what he said, nodding as if Ron could see and still writing and thinking. He had smudged some of his words in his haste.

He always has an escape plan – always, Ethan whispered and Harry nodded again. That he knew.

Perhaps blend Muggle weaponry with magic again, like back in the beginning. Voldemort won't do that, maybe, no- he won't.

Can you be sure? Ethan asked. *He may, if he pulls it from your mind or learns that you intend to. You always used to say that any liability in command destroyed an army – well you're the liability this time, except you can't back down. What do you do here, hero?*

Harry shook his head and realised he had run out of parchment. That had been a seven foot scroll. No matter, there would be plenty more. His ink pot was dry as well. There was more upstairs in his old trunk that Ron

had brought from Hogwarts.

Harry waved his hand over the parchment and the ink dried instantly. He rolled it up, folded it in half, and slipped it into his jeans pocket. There were secrets and powers on that page that humanity, on this world, had not yet discovered. It was before its time, taken from a source out of this world and Harry knew for some of it they weren't ready.

But it was what he had to work with and he would use and take advantage of all his options to see his enemies destroyed.

Darting up the stairs, Harry entered his room and glanced at the empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus briefly before heading to the trunk at the foot of his bed. He undid the latches trying to remember the last time he had, and flipped open the lid.

The first thing that caught his eye, there on the top of his neatly folded robes, was a glittering silver dagger, etched with runes up the blade and shining in the light. Harry frowned before remembering what it was, and he felt Ethan gasp in his mind.

Harry picked it up and flicked it around his fingers expertly, the razor sharp blade skimming the hairs on his hand as he flipped it over his knuckles and from hand to hand. He had had a *lot* of spare time around many campfires in forgotten worlds to learn this skill and he was now quite adept at it.

Harry didn't blink as the knife jumped from hand to hand, his eyes were closed and he did it all on the sensations in the air, the utter confidence he felt holding this weapon. It became a blur in his hands, but after a moment he caught it and turned around, opening his eyes.

"You made a promise to the other me, the saner me, the Ethan that is part of me," Ethan whispered, standing in the centre of the room. Harry watched his not-real eyes dart from the knife to his eyes.

"That I'd kill your father. That I would '*send the devil back to hell*'." He was amazed that he still remembered the exact words, but then again most of his normal memories were clearer, perhaps because they happened in this world – where he belonged.

"I had a dagger similar to that once," Ethan whispered harshly, and Harry knew this was the second Ethan, the one that had been evil once upon a time. "My... the Dark Lord gave it to me, said it had belonged to Salazar Slytherin, and with it he had scarred Godric Gryffindor – nearly cutting off half the man's face."

Harry blinked. "Was it this dagger?" he asked, and after a moment Ethan nodded.

"I remember the runes upon the blade...."

Harry sighed. "Strange," he said. "The Ethan I knew, the part of you that was always good, said he bought it in America, at a Wizarding market."

Ethan shrugged and looked tired. "Perhaps I- he did? I wouldn't know. Maybe I'm always supposed to have that dagger, for some reason. You know that stranger things have happened."

Harry looked down to the blade and then turned to his trunk and put it back on top of the pile. He thought back, trying to remember why he had come up here in the first place, and then grabbed some fresh ink and parchment when he did.

It's time for dinner, Ethan said. He sounded distant, tired, cold, fed up... time was getting to them all. He deserved rest, and Harry silently promised he would work on getting his soul fragment out of his mind.

"Harry," Ginny smiled and wrapped her arms around him when he entered the kitchen. He hugged her back slowly, as if remembering how to. "Did you have a good day?"

Harry chuckled. "The best I can remember in... months...." *Years. Decades.* "How'd your exam go?"

Ginny shrugged. "It was a lot easier with the OWL professors and without Snape," she said. "I think I at least scraped an 'Acceptable'.

"I'm sure you did well," he said, letting her go and moving over to the table, which was laden with hot, delicious smelling food. "This looks great, Mrs. Weasley."

It did look good. Hot meats and potatoes, green vegetables and gravy, crispy breads and soup. His stomach nearly leapt at the food. This was the first real meal he had had in years, beyond what he could hunt to kill on the old worlds, or pay for in the more advanced ones.

There was only Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and himself at the table, but this looked as if it could feed a dozen. Harry intended to put as much away as he could. At least that was the plan, before another face entered the room, walking in from the living room.

“Harry,” Professor Dumbledore said, “I believe it is time we spoke. Can you come with me to the living room.”

Harry’s anger was lit almost instantly. *He didn’t even ask! He demanded and expected to be obeyed.* He pointedly sat down at the table, staring unblinking at the old Headmaster. The chatter fell silent and Hermione looked at him warningly.

“I’m having dinner, sir,” he began, trying not to grind his teeth, “with my friends. It has been some time since I last had the opportunity to do this. We’ll talk later, perhaps. I’m sure Mrs. Weasley won’t object to you joining us.”

Mrs Weasley didn’t. “Of course not, Albus, there is enough to go around and more besides,” she said quickly, obviously trying to smooth over the tension. “Please sit down.”

Dumbledore and Harry looked at each other for a long moment, and there was power in their gaze. Eventually Dumbledore looked away – first, Ron noted – and saw that Harry had expected no less. Something about Harry just demanded obedience now... it was terrifying at times.

Silently now, everyone filled their plates. Hermione made idle conversation with Mrs. Weasley on one side of the table, whilst Ron spoke to Dumbledore about the Quidditch next year, and whether or not it would go ahead. That left Harry and Ginny, seated next to one another... just really enjoying each other’s company and their proximity.

Little had been more important to Harry over the years than moments like these that he had scoured more than one universe for. After all, what

did great men really dream of, if not the simple lives that could never be theirs, were always beyond them – this was as close as he had ever come.

“Does everyone know I’m back?” he asked Ginny, cutting his steak in half and then half again.

“I think they suspect but no one has come right out and said it,” she replied after a moment of thought. “The Daily Prophet pounced on the rumours that you were at the Ministry the other night, but most seem to think you dead anyway... so it wasn’t overly believed.”

Harry grinned. “Tonks told me that someone wrote a book about me. I think I’d like to read that.”

“We all gave interviews for it,” Ginny said with her own smile. “It was really Dumbledore’s idea, to help keep hope alive, he said, and it did help. Auror recruits have never been higher.”

“It is an accurate, unbiased account, Harry,” Dumbledore said from across the table. “It did really help.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m sure it did.... no matter.” With a thought he levitated the jug of cool lemonade across the table, keeping eye contact with Dumbledore, and poured some into his large glass, before setting it back down. No one mentioned the thought magic, if it had indeed been that.

The mash potatoes with gravy really were good, and alongside the steak, it was this that Harry enjoyed the most. For a time conversation stretched over safe, normal topics from the exam results to the warm weather they had been having, and away from dangerous waters like the enigma that Harry had become.

Eventually, and after he had emptied his plate, Harry dropped a few words around the table lightly, but they had the desired effect. “I was thinking of going into Diagon Alley tomorrow,” he said calmly. “Do you want to go, guys?” He directed his question towards Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. “We can get some ice cream and I can take care of a few other matters.”

Everyone made a show of not looking at Dumbledore, who was studying

Harry intently behind his half moon spectacles. His eyes held no twinkle and more than a shade of... of what? Disappointment. No, he would not be fooled by the old man. It was all a manipulation, a calculated attempt to sway him. Well, there were things inside of Harry now that he could never suspect.

"It is time to talk, Harry," Dumbledore finally said. "Follow me."

Without waiting for a reply, Dumbledore stood, thanked Mrs Weasley for dinner, and then swept out of the room towards the seating room through the oak door. Harry sighed, tapped his fork on the plate in thought for a moment and then stood.

Ginny heard him mumble, as he exited the kitchen, "No longer... I'll end this my way...."

Dumbledore stood impressively shadowed against the flickering flames of the fire, looking his age and staring almost without thought into the orange and red warmth. Harry moved just to the side of an armchair, about ten feet from the Headmaster and the fire. They stood in silence for a long moment, both aware of each other, both lost in thought and power.

"Why do you push the bounds of safety I weave for you, Harry?" Dumbledore whispered into the fire. "You know why you have to live."

Harry didn't sit down, although he wanted to. He had to stay on the same level as his old headmaster, had to be seen as an equal – if he could manage it with Dumbledore he could manage it with anyone.

"I know why you think I have to live," Harry replied, staring at the man's back. "To destroy Riddle, end a war, save the world. But if that was all I had to live for I wouldn't want it. What good am I to this world, which you've spent a life time saving, if I hide away from the darkness, if I cower from the threat? How can that inspire hope?"

"History won't remember that if you live to destroy Tom, destroy Voldemort!" Dumbledore exclaimed, turning around. He almost flinched under Harry's unerring stare.

"I don't give a damn what history remembers about me! And how many

will die in the mean time?" he asked heatedly. He had seen it a thousand times before, madmen killing innocents to get at him – to destroy their greatest threat. He would not hide, not now not ever again.

"There are always casualties, Harry, always. I would have thought you knew that by now."

Harry simmered. "Don't you turn this around to me like that," he whispered. "Don't you dare! There will be dead, there are always dead, but more if I hide, if I don't take the offensive."

"Leave the plans for war to those who have lived through one, Harry," Dumbledore said and Harry saw he was losing his temper. "You are in no position to take any offensive."

"I'm not your pawn," Harry replied, his voice still a deadly whisper. He realised he was grasping the chair arm tightly and could feel the strain in the wood. Magic had seeped into his palm and threatened to explode. He calmly let it go. "And I can disappear whenever I wish. You cannot keep me here, and I won't stay if you continue with your manipulations."

Dumbledore went from angry to sad in a heartbeat. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Harry. I never thought you would abandon us."

Harry laughed mirthlessly and turned away, glancing at the old walls with their ornaments and portraits. "I would only be abandoning you and your 'safety'," he scoffed. "The same safety that has nearly gotten me killed more than half a dozen times over the last few years. When will you realise that this isn't your war anymore, it is mine?"

Dumbledore looked as if he had physically struck him but Harry felt no remorse. Some things needed to be said, needed to be done. If it hurt, it hurt. Nothing was perfect, this least of all.

"How many have died for your manipulations?" Harry continued. "In your game? On your chessboard? How many friends, allies, family members?" He was almost shouting. "You and I live lonely lives, Dumbledore, lonely lives with no hope on the horizon save that of another battle. We *are* battle lords, I suppose, you and I. But it is time to step aside, and give command of this war to me."

That was a slip of other-world knowledge. He had been named a battle lord on a world that had been engaged in a millennia old war against darkness, against evil. It had been a dark world, most were, but he had freed it. They had named him battle lord, the world's highest honour. He still carried it with pride, he supposed. War was who he was; he took from it what he could.

"I cannot do that, Harry," Dumbledore said, simply the truth as he saw it. "But you have grown since I last saw you two months ago... tell me, how much has changed since you last saw me?"

Harry fought the urge to suck in his breath sharply. That could have a double meaning, a different interpretation. Was it possible Dumbledore knew more than he let on? Could he somehow have reasoned it all out? No, but it may not be long before he did. He wasn't named the most powerful wizard in this world for nothing.

"Nothing has changed," Harry said. "You're still trying to manipulate me, still doing what *you* think is best. I'll tell you now it isn't, and that there is no way for you to keep me out of this war."

"There are ways," Dumbledore replied, not a hint of a threat in his voice or eyes but it was implied.

Harry sighed. "Between you and Voldemort...." he said, trailing away. "You know something, old man, I can trust Voldemort more than I can trust you."

For the first time since entering the sitting room, Harry became aware of the stony silence emanating from the kitchen. It seemed the whole house was listening to the two of them. Harry ignored it, continued,

"I know where I stand with Voldemort, I understand what he wants. He wants me dead, nothing more and nothing less. He told me so more than once. You, on the other hand, manipulate from the shadows, pull strings attached to people I've never met or friends I have to keep me 'safe'. You have no right, not anymore – if you ever had – I won't allow it any longer."

"Everything I do, every step I take," Dumbledore said, "is calculated for

peace – for an end to this war. You feel slighted, Harry? Well I am sorry, but life is not fair, not for any of us.”

You’re getting nowhere, Ethan sighed. *Absolutely nowhere. He won’t give up this war to you.*

“This is my war, my fight,” Harry whispered, infusing power into his voice until the room seemed to shake. It was a trick of intimidation he had learnt years ago. “I won’t have you making mistakes – there is no room for any, not anymore. Voldemort is stronger than you can imagine... and I’m his equal. Step aside....”

Dumbledore’s shadow behind the fire seemed to tower over the room, blocking out the light, as for the man’s face... well, let’s just say Harry had seen calmer thunderstorms.

“You are a child, Harry,” he said. “Despite all you have done you are still a child, and a child is what the world will see.”

Harry growled. “Yet old enough to die facing Voldemort, Dumbledore, should it happen. You want to use me, nothing more, and I won’t allow it – I won’t.”

“What happened to you, Harry?” Dumbledore strained. “When did—”

“When did I grow a backbone?” Harry asked, raising his eyebrows and trying very hard to keep his face locked in that indifferent calm. *I’ve defeated fears you’ve never even dreamt of Albus Dumbledore. Things that can destroy a man with a glance....*

Dumbledore ignored him and continued on heedless. “We should discuss what happened in the Carpathian Mountains.” There was a hint of suggestion in that, as if he expected Harry to confess to something.

Harry smiled with satisfaction at the memory of the vampire stronghold going up in flames, reducing it to ash or less. He had enjoyed that inferno. “I... remembered,” he told Dumbledore, which explained it all really.

“Remembered what?”

Harry blinked. “Everything. But that is not important – not in the least

anymore. I'm tired, Dumbledore, I'm tired of the game... of your control."

Dumbledore softened, and the two men as one sat down in opposite chairs, the leather creaking under their weight. There was no shame in admitting he was tired, that it was all becoming just too much... that he wanted it to end.

"Duty," the old Headmaster began slowly, "duty can get heavy, Harry, but you have the strength to bear it – you must."

Harry nodded, after a moment, he nodded. "I'm ready to be seen," he told Dumbledore. "I'm ready to fight the one war I need to... I can't do that if you're against me. We should work together, at the least, to see this end."

Albus Dumbledore was, Harry supposed, the one man the world had known for decades as the leader of the light, protector of the masses. A powerful wizard fighting on the right side. Would Harry one day replace him in that image? He was well on his way if it were so, but there were pacts, promises, blood to stop that....

"You have learnt more than I think you are going to tell me," Dumbledore sighed, looking down to his linked hands resting in his lap. "So I will ask you now, Harry, as someone who cares for you, please remain in this house."

Harry stared in disbelief at the man for a long, awkward moment. "Did you...." he said dangerously. "Did you even listen to a word I said? I'm no longer hiding. Never again, Dumbledore. The sooner you understand that the sooner we can present a united front against Voldemort. I don't want fight you, or the Ministry, over the coming months, but I will. I'll do anything to see this war end!"

"Then I ask you to trust me," Dumbledore stressed. Both of them had realised that neither was going to budge an inch at this point. Harry knew it, had seen it before....

Trust, Ethan laughed harshly. *Trust no one, not even yourself.*

There is so much I have to do, Harry replied. *So much to do... I need to trust someone, I can't do it alone.*

Trust your friends then, not Dumbledore. Leave, ask them to come, take this war away from the old man. You're not short of a few galleons, or estates – live for yourself.

“Trust gets people killed,” Harry told Dumbledore. “I’m sorry we couldn’t come to an agreement, sir, I truly am. We both want the same thing... but you’re not willing to do what is necessary to get it.”

Harry stood up and Dumbledore was on his feet an instant later. Both knew that Harry had Apparated through the wards on this house once already, and he wouldn’t put it past Dumbledore to increase or change them to keep him in. Tentatively, Harry reached out with his magical sense, gaining an impression of the wards and barriers... they felt the same as they had done the other night.... but....

There was a new one, subtly hidden behind a row of other safety screens. A tracking ward, unless Harry missed his guess, that would mark when and where he Apparated to, if he should. He smiled coldly at Dumbledore.

“Trust,” he said once, shaking his head. “We’ve made grave choices tonight, Professor, grave choices... whether you know it or not. I’m going to stand on my own... I learnt to do so long ago. We’ll pay hell before the end... but it has to be. I’m sorry....”

As his last words died away, Harry wasn’t sure who he was apologising too... humanity, perhaps, for the war that was about to decimate the planet.

The next few days flew by idly for Harry, and he took full advantage of his well earned rest for the first time in decades. He never left the house, but it was of his own choice – let Dumbledore think what he would – but he wanted to spend time with his friends, to catch up, and have... well, have fun.

The four of them – Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny – spent their days lounging around the house. They played games, talked, sat in the sun, and did not much more. For Harry every minute was special, every

second he tried to remember, to force the terrible memories away and replace them with these *good* ones.

Of course, Dumbledore had an Order member or two around the house at all times, making sure he wasn't ready to sneak off or anything. Not that he wanted to, but the old man was vastly skilled at manipulation. Usually it was Remus, or Tonks, even one of the Weasley siblings inducted into the Order – people Harry cared about, and who cared about him. It was sly, underhanded, it was Dumbledore.

Though the majority of his time was spent with his friends, either doing nothing or just enjoying one another's company, Harry knew he had to keep on top of things war-wise. Time was short, time was always short, but Harry didn't think that he had ever played against so short of a deadline as this one could turn out to be.

He had faced Allarius, whom he had shared equal power with – but that demon had been insane, overconfident, pure evil. Voldemort was those things as well, but he and Harry were a lot closer. Anything could happen with the power they could wield, and Harry would not see this world damaged beyond repair, as so many had been before the Ways of Twilight....

As well as play games, Harry practiced duelling with Ron – who had turned seventeen in March after he had disappeared. The only one of his friends at headquarters legally allowed to do magic outside of Hogwarts. Harry could use magic, as they couldn't track it without a wand, but Hermione wouldn't be seventeen until September. He had thought about asking Dumbledore for help with that, but decided against it – he would do it himself.

Ron was a skilled dueller and would be against a Death Eater, perhaps. He was a bit too confident, as Harry had learnt in the empty room they used for practice. Slow on the draw as well, but there was potential – he would be a good Auror one day.

Hermione and Ginny usually watched these practice sessions, in which Harry rarely used any magic at all, but disarmed Ron without it with ease. Hermione was a source of knowledge for curses and incantations to learn. Harry struggled to remember curses and hexes when he hadn't

used them in so long – one of the reasons he didn't use magic.

Also, whenever he had a spare moment alone, Harry wrote down more of his special... knowledge... onto parchment. He had filled seven or so eight foot scrolls with everything he could remember and there was plenty more to come. He kept the scrolls in his trunk, which he sealed with magic so strong that nothing, save Voldemort, could open it in this world. There was information on those scrolls that could.... well, it was just best to keep it safely locked away.

The Daily Prophet and other newspapers were running stories about him almost every other day –from proof he was dead to proof he had been sighted in the Ministry to proof he was in hiding. The Muggle newspapers, which Hermione had delivered from her parents, also ran stories that involved him in some way. Most notably, the destruction of a certain mountain that the Muggles had deemed 'odd'.

He would set them all straight soon.

He and Ginny, when they were alone, never went much beyond talking now. There was an... *awkwardness*... between them, after a fashion. War and time had split them apart before their relationship had had a real chance to take off, and now that he was back... well it was hard, as if starting from scratch all over again. But they did start, holding hands, talking quietly in corners, and even the occasional kiss on the cheek, and that was what was important. *They did start*. It was enough for now.

It would have to be.

Sunday night, six days after he had awoken in this house, Harry lay in his bed with his hands behind his head, gazing out of the window at the stars and crescent moon. Ron was snoring over on the other bed but Harry was only aware of it on the edge of his mind – his thoughts were else where.

On matters of war and death.

<There will come a time, Darkslayer, when it will be not only wrong, but useless, to resist me. It is simply the way of life. Remember that, even if you remember nothing else. For without it, I fear you will become what

you have sworn to destroy.>

Harry recalled those words well in the darkness, the words of Death himself. He had to fight against death just a little longer, a little longer to see this world free... but he did not want to die. Harry did not know whether he had a choice anymore in that matter... Death had taken something from him, marked him... perhaps it was only a matter of time now. He would do all he could before death.

But I have so many enemies, he sighed, clouds obscuring the thin moon. And so little time....

Chapter 7 – No Rest for the Damned

So now is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man.
When duty whispers low,
Thou must,
The youth replies,
I can.

~~Ralph Waldo Emerson

DEATH EATER SKIRMISH IN MANCHESTER UNKNOWN GROUP THWARTS ATTACK!

Special Correspondent Ian Lighterman

In the early hours of this morning, June 2nd, five masked Death Eaters were apprehended by a group of unknown vigilantes, whilst they attempted to destroy the townhouse of one of the most influential wizards on the Wizengamot, Lord Arnold Echard.

This is the first move made in the war by the forces of the Dark Lord since the attack on Hogsmeade two months ago, and it ended in victory for the light. The unknown group of wizards and witches who stopped the attack, defending Lord Echard with their lives, fled the scene soon after the attack, leaving behind no clues as to their identities – and many questions.

Lord Echard offers his thanks to these heroes, and bids them to come forward , but understands if they would rather remain anonymous. The Ministry has no comment on the mysterious group.

This attack begs the question though, is our war heating up again? Are we prepared? Or will we see more attacks like the one this morning, with only silent heroes to defend us? Where were the Aurors?

There was no comment from the Ministry.

Harry read the paper with a pensive look on his face early that Monday morning, over his bowl of cornflakes. He had been looking and examining a lot of things with a pensive look over the last few days. This morning, just after getting out of the shower, he had felt the first stab of pain in his scar that he could remember in years. Voldemort had been angry, and this was probably why. It made Harry smile.

Remus, Ron, Hermione, Tonks, Mundungus, and Mrs Weasley were all at the table as well that morning. Ginny was at Hogwarts for her final OWL exams, and after today would not need to go back until her sixth year began. They all got an extra two weeks of holiday, something Harry intended to use wisely.

He had been inactive for a week, which was far too long. That said, he had only regained his memory ten days ago – but then there was no rest, no rest for the wicked.

Or the damned, Ethan mumbled.

Harry laughed and earned himself a few weird looks from around the

table. *Too true*, he told Ethan, still chuckling.

“You didn’t have anything to do with that rescue, did you, Harry?” Remus asked, pointing to the newspaper in Harry’s hand.

Harry shook his head. “No, I slept through the night. Good to see someone is doing something though – the Ministry can’t be everywhere.”

No it couldn’t... who were these strangers who would defy Voldemort, who had knowledge on Death Eater attacks. Was it possible one of them was a Death Eater spy, working against the Dark Lord? Harry didn’t know, but it was very interesting, and worth thinking more about if he was going to take charge in this war.

Perhaps he had more allies than he knew....

“Can we still go to Diagon Alley tomorrow?” Ron asked, directing his question towards his mother.

It was something Harry had brought up last night, before going to bed. A trip into the wizarding market. He needed a few things, the least of all checking out his accounts at Gringotts. Though, he was beginning to plan something... big... he needed to appear complacent with Dumbledore and the Order – so he had asked, and they had agreed, so long as a guard of five went along.

You shouldn’t have to be complacent, Ethan whispered. *You are the Darkslayer and the world should kneel to you.*

“I suppose so,” Molly Weasley sighed. “But Dumbledore will want to increase the guard if the attacks are starting up again. We can’t be relying on strangers to protect us all the time. Your father is working too hard at the Ministry though....” she trailed away with a frown.

Harry had not seen Mr Weasley at all since his return, but he had read about him in the *Prophet*. It seemed he was still working hard to fix the mistakes that Fudge had made months ago, before his death, and was only now turning towards building the defences of the nation higher. There had been speculation that the Ministry knew where Voldemort was hiding, but no move had been made against him out of fear.

Harry didn't think that was true, although he did know where Voldemort was hiding, or at least had a good idea. *Slytherin Fortress*. Hidden in a pocket of time one thousand years ago and accessible only through a portal stone on the side of a mountain in Glencoe near Loch Leven.

If he *was* there, Harry was happy to let him rot for now. It was better to know where he was and do nothing for now, than alert him that he knew, and lose that knowledge. It was all a tentative balance, a graver game than any he had played before, but he was doing his best – the scrolls and plans in his sealed trunk were enough to prove that.

"What'd you reckon, Harry?" Ron asked. "Quidditch store first up? Or ice cream?"

Harry shrugged, and swirled around the last of his soggy cornflakes with his spoon. "How about we get an ice cream and take it to the Quidditch shop?"

Ron smiled. "Man's a thinker, I've always said that."

"You boys," Hermione *tsked*. "We will of course be going to Flourish and Blotts. The NEWT study guide recommends secondary texts for all our courses an—"

"Stop right there," Ron said, raising his hand. "You – are – on – holiday," he stressed, stretching each word. Hermione just smiled.

They all bantered back and forth for a bit, happily, friendly – they were friends. Discussing topics that had no bearing on the war, or their roles in it. Staying out of troubled waters while they could. Harry enjoyed it, even though he knew it could never last.

War was coming for him again, but this time he meant to meet it head on – alone and powerless if needs be. Guns (or arms) blazing if not.

In the afternoon on that Monday, Harry found himself sorting through the contents of his trunk alone in his room. He hid the scrolls of knowledge under invisibility charms, something he had taught himself many years ago. It wasn't really making them invisible, but bending light around them.

It was certainly complicated, but he could do it to anything now – even himself.

What he was looking for, underneath all of the clothes, old school books and odd bits of paraphernalia, was a portfolio the goblins had given him when he and Remus had gone to Sirius' will reading at the bank a few months ago, or decades depending on which way he looked at it. Sometimes it was hard to discern between the two.

He eventually found it under some cloaks and pulled it out, sitting on the bed with it. Undoing the bindings, he removed the thin parchment sheets from within and read them carefully, taking note of his financial statements, share prices, and property management forms. Some of the sheets were charmed to automatically update when the stock market changed.

He had 10,000 shares in Bertie Botts Confectionary, which were worth eleven and a half galleons each, which was 115,000 galleons gold, and 10,000 shares in Nimbus worth seventeen galleons each – 170,000.

In the bank in terms of funds, in clear currency able to withdraw, he had twenty one and a half million galleons, three million four hundred and ninety seven sickles, and seven hundred thousand knuts. Would it be enough for what he had begun to plan? Time would, again, tell.

There were Black housing estates all over the globe, which was a very small place, he thought, such as in France, Australia, North America and Germany. There were pictures of them, and the one in Australia looked quite big – spacious. Would it do for what, after seeing that newspaper this morning, he had begun to plan?

It all came back to time.

Harry noticed on his financial statement, a cream coloured piece of parchment with swirling script in black ink, that the interest he had earned on his money in the last two months was astronomical. Compiling all his assets that the bank used, not to mention the amount of cash he had, they had paid him three hundred thousand galleons for its use. On each month since he had been gone the simple interest had added six hundred thousand galleons to his total balance.

Nodding, Harry filed away all the papers and placed the portfolio back in his trunk, sealing it tight. It would have to be enough... that estate in Australia would be big enough if Dumbledore didn't see the light soon. He'd approach him again before proceeding with the vague plan he had thought of that day... it would be a lot, *lot* harder if he had to do it on his own.

Harder's good, Ethan said, and for once he startled Harry.

What do you mean?

"Harder," Ethan repeated, standing in the doorway before Harry in a long black robe. His eyes were sparkling and his brown hair hung feathered down his neck. "You always excel when things are harder, Potter."

Harry stepped *through* him and out into the hall. "Perhaps," he replied.

Back in his head: *You're a centre for change, Harry – the Boy Who Lived. Perhaps you weren't supposed to live, and now everything you do effects the world in ways it wouldn't have been otherwise. No matter, you are change. How much will you change before the end? How much will be left to change?*

Harry waved his hand angrily before his face as he walked, as if to swat Ethan away. The disembodied soul had way too much thinking time on his hands. The voice died down but he could still feel his presence in his mind. It was past time to get him out of there – he had promised Ethan a century ago he would, but he didn't even know where to start with that.

Sighing heavily, Harry held it all together for another moment and then moved onto the next. The strain of everything he carried was heavy, oh so heavy, but he managed – had always managed. His hands were shaking once again.

On the edge of his mind, he heard the grandfather clock in the hall ticking away precious seconds almost mockingly.

?

The Boundary had been decimated with the conflict between the Guardians and the Destroyers showing no sign of ending, and every sign of worsening. Littering the vast emptiness of this out-world, corpses of pure energy pulsed with their dying light, both bright light and dark light.

Millions of souls, again both light and dark, faded away on the wind out of existence, never to be seen nor heard of again this side of death. Holes and tears, rips and burns, had once again appeared in the fabric, and for the first time in memory, ever, the Guardians had been able to return to the mortal worlds, or to the Higher realms.

The Destroyers had come as well, and many worlds had been scoured in their war that spilled to all corners of Existence. Godric Gryffindor, in human form, stood once again at the front lines of a large army for creatures both amazing and wonderful.

In one form or another, Gryffindor had existed for one thousand and eighty two years, had memory for those years, but never had he faced a war on this scale of destruction. There were humans in the army he had been forced to take command of, humans who were really guardians, but had been able to take on their original forms outside of the Boundary. There were also creatures not so human, but it didn't matter – they all fought for the Light.

The Destroyers were another matter, all dark and ruined husks of men and monsters. Powerful though, very powerful. Every world or realm they destroyed or enslaved added to that power and they were fast becoming a threat to the overall Balance of Light and Dark. It was all unravelling, the threads of reality and existence – Gryffindor could feel it, as could all the Guardians. It was their duty to protect it after all, and in that they were failing.

Surveying this ruined world, one that still burned, with his piercing green eyes and scarred cheek, Gryffindor spotted the rising mass of darkness on the horizon, saw how light seemed to bend away from it. He readied his forces. The war was his to command, but his army was spread across billions upon billions of worlds and levels of existence. There would be battles he would never hear of for millennia.

Sending up a silent prayer to the Creator he was never sure had ever been there, Gryffindor prayed for a way out, a way to end it and restore the Balance. He had nothing, could see no way... but what of Harry Potter?

Never, in his wildest dreams, had Gryffindor imagined that when he had founded Hogwarts it would one day lead here, that he would end up here after death. He had never truly died, but would if he did now. Guardians were given a choice to become so just a moment before death, and he had chosen this – eternal life, but not immortality.

“Your orders, Guardian Gryffindor?” a being on his right asked. A yellow, vaguely human form with three eyes and four hearts, seven fingers on each hand. None of that mattered of course – they all fought for the same thing.

“Engage them, take no prisoners – destroy the Destroyers.”

The charge went ahead but Gryffindor’s thoughts were elsewhere, with Harry Potter. Something told him that boy held... the key, to it all. But then again what could the boy do now? It would take centuries of conflict to end this war.

Diagon Alley was really no different to Harry’s memory of the place, save for a few small details like the locations of the shops and the Auror guard on every other corner and shop door.

Holding Ginny’s hand, he walked next to Ron and Hermione down the street, which was rather busy. Out of the corner of his eye Harry could see their Order guard, some older members and a few new recruits, but he wasn’t supposed to be able to see them. Ten, he counted, ten members following them.

There were plain clothed Aurors in the crowd as well, but Harry also picked them out with ease. He could sense a fighting man or woman almost instinctively, and saw the way they held themselves, the more than curious glances they gave everyone, and the wand holsters they hid underneath their robes. It all sent a positive message, he thought....

Unless Voldemort came with them, Death Eaters would be mad to attack this place again. It was too well defended – and crowded.

Had Harry looked like himself, the four of them may have encountered trouble as soon as they had entered the Leaky Cauldron, but as it was he now had shoulder length brown hair – a fringe that covered his scar, which refused transfiguration – blue eyes hidden underneath silver anti flash sunglasses, and was dressed in simple jeans and a shirt. He had done the transfiguration on his body himself, at Dumbledore's insistence of a disguise. Complacent, meek – he needed to appear so.

And needing to appear so rankled....

"Well it looks like we'll hit the Quidditch store first," Ron said, rubbing his hands together eagerly. In his pocket Harry knew he had a pouch thick with galleons. His family had been well off for money since Arthur had become Minister.

Hermione sighed and Ginny was just looking around at all the people calmly. She seemed just happy to be here. Her exams had gone well, but Harry had never doubted otherwise. Now they had until September 1st before Hogwarts began again, for her sixth year and Ron and Hermione's seventh. Harry had already decided he would *not* be going back to school, a fact Dumbledore wouldn't learn of until it was too late.

He smiled at that thought and chuckled without realising it. A touch of madness, perhaps – gained and healed but never forgotten in battles long ago.

"What's so funny?" Ginny asked as they weaved their way down the street

"Nothing that should bother us today," he replied, squeezing her hand. She squeezed it back.

The sun shone brightly today with only a few thin stratus clouds in the sky. All the sounds of Diagon Alley were like remembering a forgotten memory for Harry, as were the sights. It still felt unbelievably good to be back, to be home. So much had been sacrificed to grasp this world once again....

“I don’t want to spend all day in Quality Quidditch Supplies, Ron,” Hermione said. “I want to spend all day in Flourish and Blotts.”

“We’ll hit Flourish and Blotts later,” Ron persisted, dragging Hermione towards the Quidditch shop. “Much later.”

Harry grinned and he and Ginny followed them, who were in turn followed by two ‘minders’, Order members in disguise, whilst the other eight took up stations outside of the shop. Inside, Harry immediately ducked as a miniature broom shot through the air just over his head and did loops near the ceiling. A dozen of so snitches were flying around as well and the shop was bursting with light and sound.

It wasn’t that busy, as most were either at work or at Hogwarts, but there were still about a dozen witches and wizards in the store. Harry followed Ginny over to the broom section where a Firebolt was on display, revolving slowly in the window. Ron had dragged Hermione over to the Chudley Cannons merchandise.

“Are you going to play on the team next year, Harry?” she asked, picking up a new Nimbus and testing it for balance. The sleek broom hovered just below her waist.

“I don’t know,” he lied. He did know – he would not be at Hogwarts to play.

Ginny smiled, but there was uncertainty in her eyes – *could she suspect something?* – and then they moved on. The two Order members were doing their best to be inconspicuous, but the snitches had taken it upon themselves to buzz around their heads, and there was no clear way of being inconspicuous with six fluttering golden balls zooming around your head. Harry ignored them.

They must have spent an hour moving around the store, in which Hermione grew very impatient and started to push Ron quickly around all the sections – he had made at least three laps already and wanted to make more – but eventually Harry wanted to get on with the day, with his plans, and the two Order members did seem to be growing increasingly agitated.

In his pocket Harry only had fifteen galleons and a single knut – what he had found in his trunk – and he used that to buy a backpack from the Quidditch league merchandise section. It didn't matter which team, but he made it the Cannons just to appease Ron – who did nod approvingly at his choice – and paid at the counter. That bag would be of extreme use today, if all went to plan.

“What do you want that for, Harry?” Hermione asked as they exited the store back out onto the sunny street. Ron was carrying a bag practically bursting with Quidditch merchandise and smiling happily whilst swinging it.

“He wants it so people will know he supports the Cannons,” Ron said, as if it were obvious.

Harry laughed. “That’s as good a reason as any, I suppose,” he said, running a hand back through his shoulder length brown hair. He had found himself looking at a stranger more than once when glancing in the store window at his reflection. He didn't like it, the disguise, he should be able to walk freely in the world – but then he had to appear meek, agreeable in front of the old man.

Before slinging the bag over his shoulder – it was a horrible shade of orange with black stripes – Harry waved his hand down and muttered a few words under his breath. His palm shone for a moment, no one noticed, and then he looped the bag over his shoulder. It weighed nothing and would weigh nothing no matter how much he put in it, and he could put in a lot with the space he had extended on the inside.

“I have to go to Gringotts,” he told his friends as they headed for the bookstore, being led by Hermione, of course. Harry was happy to go anywhere today, just happy to do it with his friends, but he did need to go to Gringotts. “Do you three want to go on ahead and I'll meet you either in Flourish and Blotts or for that ice cream later?” he asked them.

“We should stick together,” Hermione began, at the same time as Ron said. “Sounds good.”

“Professor Dumbledore won't be happy if—” Hermione, ever one to obey the rules as she saw them, said quickly. Harry cut her off.

"I don't particularly care how Dumbledore feels at the moment," he whispered, his eyes flashing. "He doesn't control my life and he shouldn't control yours."

"I'll go with Harry," Ginny said, and she linked her hand through his again. "We won't be long and nothing is going to happen anyway. Fortescue's in an hour?"

Ron nodded and after a moment Hermione did as well.

Gringotts Wizarding Bank was just down the street from Flourish and Blotts, but on the way Harry and Ginny walked by a very familiar monument, filled with names and dates of death, in the square outside of the bank. Ginny sighed when she looked at it and Harry had a very clear memory of standing in the alley when it was empty with Ethan, talking about how this war would kill them.

It killed me at least, Ethan whispered wryly. Twice... well, almost twice. One and a half times your war has killed me.

Gringotts itself was another wash of memory for Harry, right down to the goblin standing in attendance by the large doors, and after they walked through these doors they came to another set of silver ones, engraved with a rhyme:

Enter	stranger,	but	take	heed			
Of	what	awaits	the	sin	of	greed	
For	those	who	take,	but	do	not	earn,
Must	pay	most	dearly	in	their	turn.	
So	if	you	seek	beneath	our	floors	
A	treasure	that	was	never	yours,		
Thief,	you	have	been	warned,	beware		
<i>Of finding more than treasure there.</i>							

Two goblin guards pushed the doors open and he and Ginny walked into the bustling foyer of the goblin bank. A line of magical folk was stationed at practically every teller, with more rushing about as if looking for a teller or filling in forms and whatnot. The large chamber stretched across the way and the long counter was filled with hundreds of goblins, all busy working, counting and weighing coins, writing in ledgers, and examining

precious stones – if not helping the customers.

Harry knew the goblins were greedy, cunning creatures by nature – they liked things kept straight forward and governed themselves mostly, but they did show proper respect for their position as bankers in the wizarding world, and as such Harry expected to be given a private room in which to discuss his finances. There was a counter for such enquiries.

He waltzed over to it, still holding Ginny's slightly cool soft hand, and felt the presence of at least four 'minders' behind him somewhere. That made him smile. They would not be able to follow him further into the bank, not even if they gave their names and explained what they were doing – which they wouldn't in any case.

"Good day," Harry said to the goblin seated before him, high up on his pedestal behind the counter. "I would like to make some enquiries about my account"

"And you are?" the goblin asked, looking down his long crooked nose at Harry and raising a thin eyebrow disdainfully.

Harry grinned. "Owner of vault 711, if that means anything to you. Just for an instant, less than five seconds, Harry transfigured himself back to normal, before returning the disguise. It wouldn't do to have the world learn of his return just yet – anonymity worked for now, even if was because he was considered dead.

"Mr. P—" the goblin began, his eyes widening in surprise.

Harry just scowled and the goblin stopped speaking abruptly. "If I could talk to an advisor in private it would be much appreciated," he said, leaving no room for nonsense.

"Follow me," the goblin said politely – politely for a goblin anyway – and Harry did. He and Ginny walked around the counter and were led down a series of passages and maze like corridors back into the heart of the bank. At one point his little goblin assistant had to stop to open a door with goblin magic, but after that it was smooth sailing down another dozen or so intricate hallways.

Harry suspected it was designed to unnerve and keep a person lost, but

his trained mind memorised the turns and, if needs be, he could follow his way back without hesitation. Eventually, the goblin stopped before a wooden door, knocked three times, and then entered when the door opened.

Harry dropped his disguise. He and Ginny were alone with just two goblins. It would not be needed.

“Mr Harry Potter to see you, sir,” the enquiry-goblin drawled. “About matters pertaining to his account.”

The larger goblin seated behind his desk didn’t give a start at his name, but his round eyes did widen slightly before a mask of indifference took over his face. “Thank you, Feric,” he said calmly. “That will be all.”

The younger smaller goblin, Feric, bowed his head and made his way out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“Mr Potter,” the other goblin began, standing and moving around his desk to stand in front of Harry. They shook hands and Harry introduced Ginny to the goblin, whose name was Engaw. “I must say that even the goblins had begun to believe the stories of your death, Mr Potter.”

“As you can see I’m alive and well, Engaw,” Harry replied with a small smile as the goblin motioned for them to sit in the two chairs before his desk. It wasn’t dark in the room, there were many candles but no windows. Apart from a stack of dishevelled parchment on his desk, Engaw kept this room neat and organised, with what seemed to be Muggle filing cabinets.

Engaw nodded. “What can Gringotts do for you today?” he then asked.

“Well I intend to make a withdrawal of several thousand galleons but that can wait. Tell me, Engaw, is it possible for the bank to obtain Muggle documentation? Passports, driving licences, birth certificates – that sort of thing.”

Engaw smiled and nodded his head. When he smiled all he did was bare his teeth. “It is, Mr Potter, for a modest fee of course.”

“Of course,” Harry agreed wryly.

Ginny frowned. "What do you want that for, Harry?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "Better to be safe than sorry," he told her. There were other, more dangerous reasons but they were for another time.

"We will need a Muggle headshot of you, sir," Engaw continued. "Perhaps one or two different ones for originalities sake. The documents would be real, in every sense of the word, but it is the little touches that matter."

"You'll have the photos," Harry said. "I would also like to sell my shares in Nimbus and Bertie Botts Confectionary as soon as possible."

Engaw nodded. "Standing transaction," he said, shuffling around in his desk draw for a moment. "Again the bank can do all of the nasty paperwork for you, at a small fee."

"Take it from however much the stock sells for," Harry said as the goblin slipped a piece of parchment across the table towards him. "What's this?" he asked.

"A stock transfer form," Engaw replied. "You sign over you stock portfolio to Gringotts, the bank will then sell them through Gringotts, taking one and a half percent from the total sale whilst the rest goes into a vault of your choosing."

Harry nodded but scanned the form quickly anyway. It was as Engaw had said. He picked up the inked quill that stood in its golden holder on the desk before him and scrawled in the vault number 711 before signing the document. Engaw bared his teeth again, and why not? That transaction had made nearly three thousand easy galleons for the bank, probably of which no small commission went to the goblin himself.

Selling the stock for about two hundred and seventy thousand galleons would not increase the amount in his vault significantly, but the stocks were just dead weight to him. He needed the money, not the say in business ventures, and every little bit would help. Harry fully intended to be broke by the end of this war, every galleon poured into *his* war effort. He didn't give a damn if he had nothing, so long as he won.

"I'd also like to sell the estates I own in France, Germany and North

America, Engaw,” he continued no sooner had he handed over the stock form. “I’m not sure of their market value, but I would like Gringotts to sell them if possible, for a modest fee of course,” he finished with a smile.

Engaw smiled as well. “Of course.”

The pictures he had of those houses made them out to be grand places, with many rooms and in prime locations. They were probably worth at least another million galleons into his account, even after the goblins took their percentage.

“Can it be done as swiftly as the stocks were?”

“Sadly, no,” Engaw sighed, tapping his desk with confidence. “Germany, North America and France, you say? I can have the forms made up tonight for you to sign and owl them out first thing tomorrow morning.”

Harry nodded – it would have to do. “Thank you,” he said, standing up. Ginny did the same. Engaw, showing proper respect for one of the bank’s richer clients, stood as well and opened his door for them. He and Harry shook hands again on the way out. “I’m looking forward to doing future business with you, Engaw,” Harry said as they exited the room.

“And I you, Mr Potter,” the smartly dressed goblin replied. “Have a good day.”

Another goblin was summoned from seemingly out of nowhere to lead them back through the maze of intricate corridors and Harry set off following the little fellow deep in thought, holding Ginny’s hand again but thinking miles away. He would be doing a lot more business, a lot more spending soon. He had kept the estate in Australia for a reason. Distance meant nothing to him, he had many ways of travelling across the distance in a heartbeat. None of them were Apparation, Portkeys, or Floo powder.

Before heading back out into the bank Harry replaced his disguise.

Back in the main busy foyer, Harry asked Feric if he could withdraw four thousand galleons from his vault and the goblin was only too happy to assist him. Saving them all a trip down to the vault in the carts, Harry had them fill his Chudley Cannons bag from the single small vault kept on the

ground floor. They did it all with smiles, and only for a small fee, of course.

Ten galleons for every five hundred drawn. All in all, Harry had just spent about twenty thousand galleons to gain over a million. Once the housing estates were sold that is, and the stocks.

They picked up their minders outside of the bank and Harry saw the relief on their faces as he emerged with Ginny unharmed. They probably weren't looking forward to face Dumbledore if they lost him. That made Harry sigh, as he was sure the old man meant well... it was just, he couldn't know that Harry was right this time.

Battle lords... he thought. We live lonely lives....

He felt sorry for Dumbledore, really – as they were the same. Both led a life fighting darkness, both having to live with more than was expected of them anyway. If he could, he would smooth things over with Dumbledore. It probably wouldn't be likely, not when the man was as easy to move as a mountain (move, not blow up) but he would try.

"When are you going to tell us what's wrong?" Ginny asked him quietly, out of nowhere. "You're planning something now," she continued, showing no emotion on her face. "Are you planning to leave again, Harry?" There was hurt in her voice despite how cold she looked.

He gazed at her from behind his sunglasses, thankful they were masking the pain he knew must be flashing across his eyes like forks of lightning. He also suppressed a small smile. She had always known how to read him best, like an open book. He had thought that he hid his emotions and feelings well... obviously not that well. War he knew, but there was a lot he didn't.

"I won't lie to you, Gin," he said as the crowds enveloped them again. "But I can't tell you now. I will tell you, soon – once I know more, that I promise."

Ginny nodded – she did, but she still looked at him with a measure of uncertainty. "Let's just go meet Ron and Hermione," was all she said.

As arranged, Ron and Hermione were seated at one of the tables in the

sun outside of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. Hermione had a bag of books on the floor at her feet and Ron was digging into his ice cream with vigour. They were talking companionably when Harry and Ginny walked up and sat down.

"Everything go okay at the bank?" Hermione asked, swirling her caramel and fudge sundae around with the small spoon.

"Harry's quite the businessman," Ginny commented wryly, smiling at him sideways. It seemed the conversation from a moment ago was forgotten for now.

"It went well enough to begin with," he said.

"To begin with what?" Ron asked through a mouthful of ice cream.

Harry just grinned. "I'll get us some ice cream, Ginny."

Five minutes later Harry returned with two bowls of what he supposed was lunch today. It had been decades since he had tasted something really sweet, so he picked pretty much the sweetest thing on the menu. Sticky toffee pudding with vanilla ice cream and a brandy-snap basket. He got Ginny the same.

It was the cake he liked the best, the fluffy warm cake covered in the sticky toffee. He had always liked cake and couldn't remember the last time he had had any. This made up for the lack of cake over the years. Cake was definitely good, and praise worthy.

"I think," he said, mixing the cold vanilla ice cream with the warm toffee, "that I may buy this place just for the cake." The thing was, he was only half joking.

Before any of his friends could reply, a sudden and extremely loud bang rocketed across the sky like a burst of thunder. It was thunder and it made everyone jump except for Harry – nothing could startle him anymore, nothing like that anyway – but as the sound rolled away, much like thunder, Harry looked up to the sky and frowned.

Apart from a few wispy white clouds the sky was clear, the sun shining warmly. He felt a pulling in his stomach though, something he had long

since associated with darkness, with Evil – the opposite of what he was. It was a talent, or rather a curse, of the Darkslayer.

“That was odd,” Ginny shrugged and Harry continued to gaze up at the sky silently.

It wasn't natural and for him to feel such a response meant it wasn't gone. He shook his head though, knowing there was nothing to do for it now – the feeling had passed. “Probably nothing,” he mumbled, more to himself than his friends. “Anyway, do we want to get on with today? I want to head to the magical instruments shop up the street.”

“What for?” Ron asked, scraping the last of his ice cream from his bowl.

Harry's face darkened considerably. “To see if they've got a pensieve.”

Harry had never really stepped far into this shop beyond the need for scales and a telescope for his lessons at Hogwarts years ago, but the business did reach back far into more complex and sometimes utterly useless magical instruments. Pensieves were rare, Hermione informed him, and of course expensive.

The shop had enough shiny instruments to put Dumbledore's office to shame, most of them glowing or spinning or doing something that they were obviously designed to do. One, in the corner, looked like an upside down vase that was constantly sprouting different coloured smoke rings. Harry couldn't even begin to fathom its purpose.

There was an old man behind the counter, dressed in purple robes and sporting a rather large moustache underneath his silver eyes. Harry thought that he looked as extravagant as some of the instruments he sold.

“Good day, sir,” he said as Harry approached the counter, which was again covered in broken parts of magical instruments, some still trying to produce noises or lights for whatever it was they did. “Welcome to my store, how can I help you today?”

Ron and Hermione had gone off exploring the store and Ginny, as he had expected, stuck by him – as if afraid he was going to up and disappear again. Without really thinking about it he took her hand again.

"I'm looking for a pensieve," Harry informed the man.

He raised his eyebrows appreciatively for a moment but then frowned. "Pensieve, you say... well, I've got one – had it for more years than I care to remember since no one has had the money to buy it. They're an indulgence really, pensieves, not something practical like this Sippoglass here."

He gestured to a three pronged tripod-like device that looked to be made of bronze. It shook from left to right, like a pendulum, and that seemed to be the extent of its abilities. Harry didn't know what to make of it, so he ignored it. For some reason all these devices unnerved him.

"I can pay..." Harry began, but then switched tactics. "How much?"

"Well it is a fairly new model, made thirty years ago – there have been only about six made since that time and none were much of an improvement," the man said, looking thoughtful and stroking his chin. "It can store about one thousand hours of memory, fairly small and light for its capacity. I can't let it go for anything less than two thousand galleons."

Harry nodded, expecting no less, and unslung the feather light bag from his shoulder. "Is gold okay?" he asked.

The man was wary until Harry began to pull sackfuls of gold from the bag. Each brown sack held five hundred galleons and he handed over four, half of what he had withdrawn earlier.

"Blimey," the man choked, pulling a small pipe out of his robes and biting down on it. "It's out the back – I'll just go fetch it."

"Is this all you want to do today?" Ginny asked as the man disappeared.

"For now it is all I can do," he told her absently, unaware that his gaze had drifted upwards towards the ceiling, but it went beyond that to the sky. He felt the pull again. Shaking his head he looked back at Ginny. "Do you want to do anything else? We can runaway if you want, out into the Muggle world – find something fun to do."

Ginny smiled and rolled her eyes. "Harry," she sighed, and hugged him close briefly.

Frowning and smiling, Harry hugged her back. He understood so much about the universe, had known and understood many men who had lived and died and now lived again, but he thought that he would never understand women. He just hugged her back, thankful that he could.

"Here we are, sir," the old man said and scraped away a load of loose parts off the counter and onto the floor. He dropped the heavy stone basin with a grunt and slid its lid back into place trying to catch his breath. "As I said, for its memory size, it is very light."

It wasn't that heavy, Harry supposed, as he ran his fingers along the runes around the edge and lifted it off the counter. He asked Ginny to open his Cannons bag as wide as it would go and she did. It just fit in when he pushed it, scraping along the zip before falling into the larger space created by magic. It might be a hassle getting it out again, but it was in for now. Zipping up the bag, it weighed nothing, Harry turned to shake the man's hand.

"You got a name, son?" the man asked as they shook.

"Ethan," Harry said without hesitating. "Ethan Rafe." His fringe was covering his scar and his eyes were hidden behind his glasses – it helped the lie.

"Well, thank you for your custom, Mr Rafe; I hope to see you again."

Smooth, Ethan chuckled. *Even I believed it.*

Ginny looked upset for some reason – but neither of them mentioned it.

The world seemed darker when the four friends exited the shop, and Harry glared up at the developing clouds in the sky – it wasn't natural. The thin wisps had grown thicker, and darker. He scowled, something was happening and he had a feeling it was to do with him. He usually had a hand in things like this – whatever this was. Evil and madmen seemed drawn to him like a moth to the flame.

"Looks like it's getting a bit stormy," Hermione commented, rubbing her arms. Ron was carrying her book bag and he nodded his agreement. "Seems late in the year for a thunderstorm."

Harry was inclined to agree when he decided it was time to leave. Unconsciously he clenched his fists and behind his sunglasses his eyes burnt with power. Something... wicked was on the horizon.

No rest for the damned.

That night Ginny was sent to find Harry upstairs at Headquarters and bring him down for dinner. She felt that he had been distant since they had returned from Diagon Alley but could not reason out why. He was happy enough when spoken to but he seemed distracted now, kept looking out of the windows – it was odd.

Climbing the stairs, Ginny didn't find him in his bedroom or on the second floor at all. That really only left one place, up in Buckbeak's room, that he would be. She set off that way in no great hurry – if he was going to leave he would at least say goodbye first, that much she could trust him on.

You can trust him more than that, she told herself. He's Harry.

That was true enough but—no, no buts. It was Harry, Harry who never complained and always tried his hardest to do what they all knew was right. He deserved her trust, even if he did gamble with it.

That's not fair, she thought. It isn't fair to think that he should keep himself safe when he never really has. If he has to do something, if he has to leave, then it could only be for a good reason. Still, it hurt to think he could leave her again. Didn't he love her anymore? He was planning something, planning something big, but never once mentioned their relationship – which had run aground of late.

Ginny felt the distance that had grown up between them like a biting cold she couldn't warm herself from. It was more than just the absence, the two months he had been missing, Harry himself had changed – grown up – in that time. He was more mature, yet still willing to make a joke or two; at least she thought some of the things he said were supposed to be jokes. Most did not make sense to anyone *but* Harry.

And then there were the moments his eyes seemed to turn in on

themselves, as if he was listening to something none of them could hear. *A voice in his head...?* she wondered, shaking in spite of herself. *Could Harry be slightly mad....?*

Maybe he was just thinking... deeply.

Ginny sighed and shook her head whilst a glint of determination shone in her eyes. Something had happened to Harry, something big, and whatever it was she would help him work his way through it, make him talk about it even if she had to beat through that wall he kept around most of his emotions.

I love the big idiot, she thought fondly. *And I'll love him no matter what has happened.*

Up in the highest room in the house Ginny did not see Harry. Buckbeak was asleep on the big king-sized bed which he had been using as a shredding post for his claws, and a cold wind blew in through the open window. Ginny could see a splattering of bright stars and thick heavy clouds out of the window and she went over to close it, not wanting to let a draft in.

Reaching the windowsill she saw Harry sitting out on the roof; saw his silhouette next to the shining silver stone basin, the pensieve. He sat on one of the moderately flat parts, his legs dangling near the edge and looking out over London. Beneath him Ginny knew was a fair drop into the backyard.

She was about to call out of him, but he beat her to it.

“Come out here and sit with me, Ginny,” his dark shadow said, sitting in stark contrast in the star light. As he spoke, a long thin tendril of silver light dropped from his finger and into the pensieve.

Trying to figure out how he had known she was there – she was sure that she had not made a sound – Ginny hesitated only for a moment before *trusting* Harry and stepping up and out onto the ledge of the window with her slippered foot. There was only a small wind and a small drop onto the roof and Ginny did it easily, having no fear of heights thanks to her Quidditch training.

The roof was made of slate tiles and she made her way carefully down further out onto the roof towards the edge where Harry was sitting. It wasn't a steep incline, but then again it wasn't flat either. Sitting down quickly on the other side of the pensieve, she sat cross legged and rested her arm on the edge of the silvery stone basin.

"What are you doing out here, Harry?" she asked, wrapping her sleeping robe closely around herself. "It's getting cold."

Harry nodded, his green eyes sparkling as he gazed up at the few remaining stars not hidden by the clouds. "I know," he told her. "Too cold, too soon...."

He touched his forehead again and when he pulled his finger away another silvery strand of memory came with it. He placed it carefully in the pensieve. Looking into the basin, Ginny saw that a very thin layer of shining silvery thought covered the bottom left corner.

"I came to tell you that dinner is ready," she said softly, gazing up from the basin and into his face. It was so careworn, lined and fatigued. He looked tired – beyond tired, but his eyes were sparkling. For the first time she noticed the streaks of grey in his hair. He was tired.

"Is Dumbledore here?" he asked.

Ginny shook her head. "I haven't seen him. Remus is though; he wants to talk to you about your werewolf potion."

Harry nodded. "Feels like its going to rain," he mumbled.

Ginny agreed, looking at the sky. The storm clouds had come out of nowhere, building fast since that afternoon, and towered over London. She shuddered and then wondered why, it wasn't the cold. "Early summer showers maybe," she offered.

Harry shook his head now. "No... I don't think so." Another wisp of memory fell into the pensieve.

"What was that one?" she asked, indicating to the small amount of thought liquid in the basin with her head.

Harry's smile didn't reach his eyes. "That was of fighting Death Eaters."

"You fought Death Eaters while you were gone!?" she exclaimed. Nothing made sense about Harry's disappearance – nothing.

"It might take me a week or two," he replied, "but you'll know everything once I've put it in this... thing."

Pain marred Harry's tired face for a moment but then he masked it well. Not well enough, she thought, not nearly well enough if he was trying to hide it. *What could be so bad you can't just tell us, Harry?* she asked herself, feeling nervous. It was then that she became aware that Harry's hands were shaking and he looked like he was going to be sick.

"Harry," she began. "Y—"

"I'm just cold," he cut in quickly and rubbed his hands together. "And hungry. Let's go down to the kitchen."

Harry levitated the pensieve all the way down to his room and then locked it away tight inside of his Cannons backpack which he sealed inside of his trunk. No one was getting into those memories before time – there was a lot of hurt in there, for everyone involved.

"Good evening, Remus," Harry said as he entered the kitchen, taking up his usual place at the table. "You're looking well."

Younger every time he saw the former werewolf, Remus' grin lit up his once haggard face. "I hear you got to spend some time out of the house today, Harry," he began. "How was Diagon Alley?"

"Much the same," he shrugged, rubbing the small fuzzy growth on his cheek. "Felt a lot... smaller, I think."

Remus nodded. "I wanted to ask you about the potion," he said. Seated at the head of the table, Harry began to fill his plate as he listened to Remus. Mrs Weasley, Ron, Hermione and Ginny were there as well, and from the sounds of things there were other Order members in the living room.

"Fire away."

Remus nodded. "Can it be used before the change on a full moon? Or does the transformation have to take place?"

Harry thought for a moment. Such things like this were complex and could be modified but with varying degrees of success. "It can be administered before the full moon," he said carefully. "But it may not cure them completely and the... disease could grow again. It was really just a coincidence that you happened to be transformed the day I woke up, but it worked in our favour. As a wolf the potion had a chance to kill the disease at its source – if it were given whilst human the sickness could survive. Better, safer, to wait until the transformation."

"I'd thought as much," Remus stated with a sigh. "No matter. I guess if it was meant to be easy there would have been a cure years ago...."

Harry sensed a hint of a question in that, but it would take *hours* if not days to explain the source of his cure. But he could understand the curiosity. He just hoped Remus was not asking on Dumbledore's behalf (orders?).

"My parents want to take me to Australia for a holiday this year," Hermione was speaking to Ron, quickly as if she had just worked up the courage. "Which is probably about as far away from this war as we could get, so do you think maybe that you could come, Ron? For a week or two at least?"

Ron looked up to his mother. "What do you think, mum? I am of age now and I've never seen Australia."

Mrs Weasley frowned but it turned into a smile when she looked at Ron and Hermione together. "I'm sure we can work something out for a week or two, dear," she said. "A holiday away from the unpleasantness around here would probably do you good."

Ron grinned from ear to ear and put his arm around Hermione briefly, who was also having trouble hiding her grin. "And Harry and Ginny," she said. "If you could come as well my parents would really like to meet you, Gin, and you again, Harry – they haven't forgotten what you did back at Christmas."

Harry frowned – he couldn't remember what he had done back at Christmas. His memory was fuzzy but he seemed to recall a levitating bus and a broken arm. Voldemort had learnt of the prophecy using Legilimency, so they had in turn released it to the world. But he had saved all of their lives with the floo powder before Voldemort had arrived.

"It's different for Harry," Mrs Weasley said quickly. "It isn't as safe for him to leave the house for too long, dear, you know that. And he's just getting over his... ordeal. No, it would be better for Harry to stay."

"I'll decide what is better for me," Harry said in such a way that the very air seemed to drop ten degrees. He placed his fork calmly on the table to stare at Mrs Weasley. "Thank you for your concern, Mrs Weasley, but I grew up a long time ago and I can make my own choices now."

The last estate he had kept was in Australia. A large place, a manor house with a lot of acreage surrounding it. Perhaps perfect for training in.... he was getting too far ahead of himself there. But this trip would be the perfect opportunity to see the place for himself. More than that he wanted to go with his friends, wanted a normal holiday even if he did mix it with work – with war.

There was also a family in Australia he owed thanks to for taking him in when he was a memory-less mess. Sort of a life debt, he supposed, and he owed them money – for the barn and property destruction. Vampires had attacked them because of him, the godforsaken Darkslayer.

Mrs Weasley flushed – whether because she was upset or angry he didn't know, probably a bit of both. He was sorry he had... well, hurt her, but he didn't regret saying what he said. The sooner people began to treat him properly the sooner it would be easier for everyone. Staying in this house six out of seven days a week was no life, it wasn't worth living – he may as well have died in one of the millions of opportunities across the worlds.

"Harry Potter," she said strictly. "The Order does a lot to keep you safe, whether you've grown up or not."

As she said that something in Harry's mind clicked and he thought of Dumbledore. Could he... could he possibly... *did the old man blame*

himself, think he had failed in someway? And was now doing everything he could to keep him from harm for as long as he could... surely not.

Down the hall, Harry heard the front door open and close and could hear muttered whisperings coming to a stop in the other room. Tonks came through a moment later and nodded her neon blue short spiky hair towards him. "The Order would like to see you in here for a moment, Harry, if you would."

Harry nodded and left the table, smiling reassuringly at his friends. Remus frowned and came with him, clapping a hand on his shoulder as they walked into the front living room. There were a dozen people in there, seated in chairs and standing around the fire, or in Snape's case standing back in the shadows with a scowl.

Dumbledore was there, as was Dermal Trask. They were hanging their cloaks on the pegs near the door, and Dermal was carrying a thin object wrapped in thin brown leather.

Apart from Dumbledore, Remus, Snape, Dermal, Tonks, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, Harry could not recall the names of the other witches and wizards in the room. They were both young and old and a few tugged at his memory... but it had been a very, very long time.

"Harry," Dermal Trask said, smiling. It always looked like he was about to bite something when he smiled, maybe because his scarred face became stretched and his missing teeth were exposed. "I've got something here that belongs to you."

Harry had an inkling as to what it was and he wasn't wrong when Dermal unrolled the leather strip he was holding to reveal the glowing, ruby encrusted sword of Gryffindor. It pulled at Harry as soon as he saw it, and he moved across the room to take it from Dermal. The last time Harry had seen *this* sword it had been embedded in his shoulder and sticking out of his back – one hundred years ago. His mind was all over the place.

It belonged in his left arm, as he already carried one in his right. It had been something he kept in the change over to his younger self, the sword, and really Harry had never doubted that he would keep it. It just

seemed right. With a thought Harry summoned the blade into his left hand and it appeared there in a shower of red sparks that floated softly to the ground. All of those eyes watching him at the moment instinctively felt that it belonged with him, that it looked right with him.

"Thanks, Trask," Harry said, and hid it away just out of sight in his arm. It sadly made him feel complete again, now that he had his weapon back.

"Good evening, my boy," Dumbledore said, showing no sign of their argument the other evening. "I'm glad to find you here."

Harry snorted and turned away, heading over to a seat currently occupied by Tonks. He sat down on the arm next to her. "Where else would I be, Professor?" he asked. "It seems it's just been one prison after another for the last two months."

Now that wasn't fair and Harry regretted saying it almost straight away. Or did he? He was conflicted. He sighed as the Order members eyed him with shame and anger, disappointment and incredulity. All except for Dermas, Remus, and Tonks – their faces remained neutral.

"That is what we are here to talk to you about, Harry," Dumbledore continued, taking the seat offered to him by Kingsley near the fire. "The unfortunate events you went through over the last two months. We want to know if you are feeling well, not just physically but mentally also."

Harry almost smiled but managed to keep his face calm. They wanted to know if he was alright in the head.

Do you want some help on this one? Ethan asked, laughing. *Just follow my lead and say what I say: Well, you see, Dumbledore, I've been talking to a lot of voices in my head since I left – one was a demon named Allarius, pretty bad guy with a weak sense of humour. Right now, there's only one and it just so happens to be the Dark Lord's son. Talking to him actually kept me sane whilst I waded through all the shit the universe managed to throw at me on a daily basis.*

"I'm as sane as the next wizard," he told Dumbledore dismissively. "After all the crap that happened to me *before* this little abduction by the vampires, I'm pretty much adjusted enough to cope with a month out in

the cold. I managed to escape, didn't I?"

"How did you escape, Potter?" Snape asked – no, demanded to know – and openly sneered from his dark corner.

"Don't you have a cauldron brewing somewhere that needs your attention?" he asked the man. "If not I can give you the recipe for another incurable disease, potions master."

Face hidden in the shadows, Harry actually heard Snape grinding his teeth.

"You've changed, Harry," Tonks said unexpectedly to his left, putting a hand on his arm and looking up at him with concern. "You don't seem yourself and we are worried."

"There are people at St Mungo's who will be willing to listen, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Unless you want to talk to one of us – it may help to let someone in."

This time Harry did laugh, he couldn't help it. "If I told them even what happened in the first few days after I disappeared." He continued to laugh but it was without mirth and sounded more than a little insane "Just the first few days and they'd be locking me up in a padded room away from sharp objects. I wouldn't put it passed some of you either."

"Harry," Dumbledore stressed, his old face looking every one of its years, "I, we, are here to help you – to keep you safe. We will listen."

For a few moments Harry's mouth worked soundlessly and he went from laughing to white hot anger in an instant. When he spoke his voice was a deadly, dangerous whisper, and even Remus took a step back behind him as his presence seemed to suddenly take over the room, enveloping even Dumbledore.

"Keep me safe...." he whispered. "All you do is lock me away every chance you get, keep me ignorant of what is happening in the world, shield me from the truth. Answer me a few questions and then truly ask yourselves if you have kept me 'safe'. Number one, how many times has Voldemort stabbed any of you through the chest with a thirty five inch blade?" His question was directed to the whole group but he kept his

eyes solely on Dumbledore.

Harry was wearing a thin polo shirt that was very loose and as such he had no trouble stretching the collar down to reveal the tangled mess of scar tissue that was his right shoulder. More than one member of the Order winced and Dumbledore paled. Maybe he had finally realised that Harry held all the cards.

“You like that one?” Harry asked, shrugging his collar back into place. “I got plenty more scars, most gained from trusting you and your promises of protection.” Again, eyes only on Dumbledore. He turned his left forearm out to reveal a long jagged scar running from just beneath his elbow to halfway towards his wrist. “Voldemort again, he used some spell to force my bone out through the skin. Another.” He lifted the leg of his jeans and revealed a long straight scar that forked out, making the letter Y if looked at upside down. “Bellatrix Lestrange gave me this one after your protection failed on my prison at the Dursleys. I killed my first Death Eater that night.”

No one had anything to say and Harry realised he was breathing heavily. He calmed himself without visible struggle. He had only just scratched the surface. His mind remembered hundreds of wounds that his body didn't show anymore, but they were there. That wasn't the Orders fault, not directly, but it felt good to blame someone other than himself for awhile – however immature that was. He was close to breaking point. The magic inside of him boiled, it burned, begging for release. Harry kept it on a tight leash.

“Another question,” he continued in that quiet whisper. “What could you possibly do that could help me now? This scar,” and now he lifted his fringe to reveal the infamous lightning bolt, “ties me to Voldemort. I'm closer to him at this very moment than most of you have ever been. Sometimes it's a constant struggle to keep him out of my mind, and it has gone way beyond Occlumency.” His eyes flickered to Snape and back.

Although his scar had only twinged once since he had been back, it had been infinitely worse before he left. What he said was true, if based on the time frame of two months. Outside he could still sense something....

malevolent about the storm brewing, but it was of little concern right now.

“Harry,” Dumbledore began, his voice shaking only slightly. “Harry, you need to talk to someone. It really will help—”

It was too much. The man would not listen. Harry snapped and lashed out. “WHY?” he roared. “NO ONE CAN HELP ME WITH WHAT I HAVE TO DEAL WITH! NO ONE! YOU LOT CAN’T EVEN BEGIN TO IMAGINE....”

The air was suddenly charged with power, practically humming with it, and it was all coming from Harry – whose eyes were shining faintly blue. Or, perhaps, it was not his eyes that were glowing but the tears welling up inside of them.

“WHY DO YOU PERSIST, DUMBLEDORE?” he cried and the flames in the fire almost died. The Order looked scared but he carried on, not giving a damn. “DO YOU FEEL GUILTY MAYBE? ARE YOU SCARED YOUR PRECIOUS WEAPON IS GOING TO SNAP? MAYBE YOU JUST CAN’T STOP TRYING TO CONTROL ME – YOU’VE BEEN DOING IT FOR SO DAMN LONG!”

Harry held his tears in check but only just and the light in his eyes faded as he felt a warm hand on his shoulder. Just from the softness of it he knew it was Ginny, always Ginny. On the arm of the chair he sat on he leaned back to look up into her face. He felt that he had reached a complete loss, that he was trapped in despair... and there was Ginny like an anchor to sanity, a shield to the horrendous memories.

He didn’t have to say anything and neither did she. Their eyes said more than enough. Harry stood and grasped her hand tightly. He stood tall. He was aware of Ron and Hermione standing behind him and that Mrs Weasley had entered the room as well.

“Here is how it is going be,” he whispered, his voice pain wrought – forged in anguish. Ginny stood defiantly next to him as he spoke his next words to the Order, her hand gripping his just as fiercely as he was gripping hers. “I’m only going to say this once, and if any of you,” His eyes settled on Dumbledore again. “If any of you don’t listen, or argue, I will leave this house tonight and never return – tracking wards or no

tracking wards. I can go places you will never find me.”

Folds in reality, Ethan cackled. *Stepping into different layers of this piece of the fabric. You worked out Allarius’ trick and didn’t tell me! I’m affronted, Harry.*

Although no words were spoken then, no one in the room doubted Harry could do what he said. There was just... no lie in his eyes.

“The cost of defiance has always been high for me,” he sighed, fading into memory before snapping out again. “Too high at times, and many paid in blood for it – but I’ve always done it for the right cause, for the greater good. Remember that, because I intend to fight this war openly from now on, in defiance to Voldemort and the cost in life will be high.”

It always is, he whispered in his mind. *A universal constant, no matter which universe I’m in, bloody war can never be avoided.*

Give them hell, Darkslayer, Ethan replied.

“No one is asking any of you to fight,” Harry continued. “No madman has hunted you since birth, no prophecy dictates your life.” *Prophecies*. “And yet you do fight, for the right cause – all of you. I have a final question for you now, before we are finished here tonight.” His tone left no possibility of it being otherwise. “What right do you think you have to stop me fighting just like you, until *you* think I’m ready? Well? Can anyone answer that? Why should *I*, the only one forced into this war without a choice, be left to do nothing?”

There was no answer and Harry hadn’t expected one. For a moment he felt that the only thing keeping him on his feet was Ginny’s warm and tight grip. Dumbledore looked about to speak but Harry beat him to it.

“I know you came here tonight to honestly try and help me.” Again this was directed mainly towards Dumbledore. “And I am thankful for that, more than thankful – but it is true when I say that none of you can help me now. Fate gave me this war to fight before I was even born, and I swear on my life and magic that I will fight it until death – in the open, in defiance of any that serve Darkness.”

Here Harry paused and his gaze slipped past the shocked looking

Headmaster and into the uncertain future, as it had a way of doing at these times. All he could see were battles and blood on the horizon, no matter which way he looked at his choices, but then when had it ever been anything else? He would have been lost if it wasn't.

"And when all is said and done, ladies and gentlemen," Harry finished and met every eye in the room, "that is all I have to say. So pack away the tracking devices, cancel the guard, and stop telling me what to do... because I'll be keeping this world safe – I'll be doing the protecting from now on. It's my job, my purpose, my truth... what I was made for, and I don't ask you to understand that, but I'm *telling* you to accept it."

Lord Voldemort felt the power of the storm clouds over London, felt the power in the beginnings of the storm demon. Before him, in the forest near Loch Leven, a silvery pool shone in the darkness as the water surged and bubbled, transformed and wrought itself around pure evil and malice.

The demon was taking form and it was time to add the hair from Potter's head. Voldemort did so and the icy water became freezing, the bubbling ceased and an eerie calm settled over the pool. Yet a presence could be felt now, the presence of a demon not felt for centuries in this world – not since the last elemental had died. The power inside the creation was complete.

"Who is your master?" Voldemort hissed, his hands still encased in flowing red power that burnt the eye.

Lord Voldemort, came a reply from the rising mist inside of Voldemort's head. He began to laugh. The monster before him was powerful enough to wreak havoc with the world's elements, with the weather itself. It would be interesting to see if Potter survived this one.

Voldemort had made a few modifications to the demon, of course, added his own touch on an old blood spell – made it stronger by fusing his own raw magic into its creation. No normal wizard would stand a chance against the storm demon.

“And who must you destroy?” the Dark Lord whispered into the empty night. There was not a living creature within a mile, as all animal life had fled from the evil they could feel emanating from Voldemort.

Darkslayer.

It was the right answer, and the roar of fury and anger, power and hate that emerged from the misty figure that was growing fast was unbelievable. Voldemort laughed into the night again – it had been worth sacrificing twelve vampires and twelve Death Eaters to bring this creature to life.

Massive storm clouds roiled over head and would soon stretch across the entire country and, if left unchecked, the world. There would be no dawn in the United Kingdom – there would never be a dawn again. And that suited Voldemort just fine – he would bring his demon army through a gateway into a terrified world of darkness, which they would destroy.

Forks of lightning swirled around the evil before the Dark Lord and were spat up into the clouds overhead. There was a great hissing and then the presence before him was gone, shooting up into its clouds, already strong enough to seek its target.

You made the first move, Potter, Voldemort whispered to himself in his dark, terrible mind. You made the first move when you destroyed half my vampires... well, now I have made my move. Who will win, I wonder, in the end? Will there be anyone left but ourselves to care? I hope not... if only to hear a billion voices scream in unison as you burn.

Chapter 8 – Hero of the Sky

*He who does not punish evil,
commands it to be done.*

~~ Da Vinci

It was a cold and lightless dawn that broke over London that Wednesday morning, if such an absence of dawn and light could actually be called morning. Roiling and towering thunder clouds blanketed the sky as far as the eye could see, and the only illumination came from the buildings and streets of the eerily quiet city.

Harry Potter stood with his hands in his pockets on the roof of 12 Grimmauld Place, the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. He had slept maybe three hours last night, in fits, after declaring his intentions to the Order. He had left them stunned, to say the least, and none had approached him afterwards in case he carried out his threat of leaving.

Still, that was of little importance at the moment – little importance at any moment. It was the storm brewing over his world that kept Harry's attention that morning. Since midnight, perhaps, he had stood out on the slate tile roof, unmoving and gazing at the developing storm. It wasn't natural, the storm, but his waiting felt like nothing more than the blink of an eye. Harry had long since schooled himself in being patient.

Try as he might, Harry had been unable to dispel the storm clouds with his power, and that power was capable of doing almost everything. His thoughts, his incantations and wielding had, if anything, darkened the enormous unnatural clouds. The sun should have been at least six degrees over the horizon by now – the beginning of daylight.

A cold and steadily increasing wind blew his eternally-messy hair about his head and his dangerous emerald eyes sparkled at a roll of thunder that tore through the clouds, which was followed by another, louder, blast.

This is his doing, Harry spoke to Ethan. I can feel his touch on it, more of a taint on an already evil being.

Things have been a bit boring of late, Ethan replied. Today should be... exciting.

Can you feel it also, Ethan? Harry asked the voice he had been fused with for more decades than he cared to recall. *That... itch, the pulling, the feel of Evil? I've never asked you that and you've never come forward with it.*

"I feel it...." Ethan said, his face drawn into a scowl as he stood next to Harry before the storm on the roof. Lightning illuminated the dark clouds from within but it did not break or fork in the sky. "You are drawn to evil, Harry, and I don't envy you for it. Should you survive in the end, I expect you'll live another lonely life."

"What are your thoughts on Dumbledore? Do you think he'll stop trying to control me? *Help* me?"

Ethan shrugged, the wind was not ruffling his cloak at all, although it whipped Harry's shirt around. "I think... I think if you want to keep the old man alive, you should concentrate on that blossoming plan of yours and draw Voldemort's attention to you. You know he could kill Dumbledore with a thought now, if he got close enough...."

Harry laughed bitterly. "I remember the moment I gave him that power," he whispered. "One hundred years ago... two and a half months, really, when I stepped in front of the Killing Curse yet again."

Thunder rumbled across the sky and Ethan was gone, as if he had never been. Harry could still feel him though, like a knot in his mind he had to untie. Time – time, time, time... there was never enough. For a moment the thunder sounded like deep, rolling laughter – insane laughter – but it was over a moment later.

Harry had no illusions that he had heard that though – he had seen a lot of darkness over his life, and wouldn't put anything past Voldemort.

"Are you up there, Tom?" he whispered into the storm. "Maybe not you – but your touch!" Harry spun on the spot and headed back into the house. He was neither cold nor warm, shivering or sneezing – his mind had been detached from the elements whilst he had stood out there, and nothing had fazed him.

Downstairs, Harry was met with chaos in the kitchen of headquarters. Order members were running about, many had books or parchment scrolls in their hands, throwing them onto the side or table, whilst others tore through them as fast as they could, obviously scanning for keywords. Dumbledore was there and he sat at the head of the table fingering a glowing green envelope with apprehension when his gaze fell

on Harry.

For a moment there was a calculating look on the old man's face, one of disappointment and perhaps anger as well, but he stood when Harry entered. Harry saw another piece of parchment glowing faintly on the table before Dumbledore. Both reeked of dark magic, so much so that Harry could taste it in the back of his throat, like a really sour lemon.

"A letter for you, Harry," Dumbledore said, offering the green envelope. "From Voldemort, unless I miss my guess. A dark eagle dropped both of them before me here, just a moment ago, before bursting into flames."

Harry had thought he could smell burning feathers. The Order members, Tonks, Remus, Kingsley, Mundungus, a handful of others he didn't recall had slowed considerably. Some of them hadn't been at the meeting the previous evening, but word would have spread. A rift between Harry and Dumbledore would stop the best of wizards.

"What's he got to say for himself?" Harry wondered, taking the offered letter. Thunder boomed across the sky outside as he spoke.

"He said, in the message he sent me," Dumbledore whispered, although every ear heard it, "that the worsening storm outside was his doing, and that it would kill you."

"A storm?" Harry sneered. "He sent a storm to kill me... bigger things have tried."

Not sensing any traps or Portkeys or nothing beyond the hand of evil on the letter, Harry broke the flaming wax seal and removed the slip of parchment from within. It was, quite dramatically, written in letters of burning fire, which ate into the parchment but not through it.

Potter,

I offer you my congratulations once again on surviving our last meeting. Had I known you would, I, of course, would have driven the sword through your heart. A pity, I'm sure you'll agree, that I didn't, considering the implications of that day.

Nevertheless, someone as resilient as you, boy, should have no trouble

against the storm demon I've conjured – with a few modifications of my own devising. Consider it a reward for your destruction of half my vampire clans.

However powerful you have become, Darkslayer – yes, I know of that, as well – you are still just a boy playing in a God's world, and your defeat has been blazing in the fires of prophecy for thousands of years.

Take care, Harry, for the nightmares are real.

It wasn't signed but then it didn't need to be. Harry calmly read it through again before handing it to Dumbledore. He would show the old man that they could work together, even if it did reveal one or two of his secrets. Darkslayer... he had, of course, assumed Voldemort would know about that. But what was this fires of prophecy rubbish? It sounded too confident, too sure. What did Voldemort know that he didn't?

"Nothing on storm demons in here, Dumbledore," Tonks said, casting aside a thick tome entitled – *Storm Magic*. "And nothing in the *Advanced Illegal Conjuring* book either. I don't even know why that book exists...."

Dumbledore's eyes locked onto Harry's as soon as he had finished reading the note, and Harry saw him mouthing the word '*Darkslayer*' as if it meant something to him. Harry didn't think it could though, not when it was so obscure that he had learnt nothing on it, not even at the Ways of Twilight. Apparently there were limits to everything. One thing he had known about the name, was that basically every world knew it after some fashion.

"I'd say Voldemort is calling me out," Harry said conversationally, as if discussing what to have for breakfast. "Storm demon... can't say I know what one of them is, but let's go find out."

"It may not be this... demon," Dumbledore replied. "None since the elementals have been able to manipulate weather on such a scale – it may just be an illusion, Harry."

It didn't feel like an illusion – it felt real, and getting closer.

"No I don't think so, Professor," Harry shook his head. "But what do you know about storm demons?"

Dumbledore shrugged and raised his palms, as if to say not much. “They *are* weather, Harry. Destructive weather. Many believe them just legend, ancient wizards – elementals – putting a god into just freak weather occurrences. Flash floods, tornados, hail storms, blizzards, a storm demon *is* these things. Apparently....”

“Apparently there is one outside,” Harry finished, cracking his knuckles. “Should I take an umbrella then?” He turned away from the kitchen, laughing, and met Ron, Hermione and Ginny standing behind him. “Good morning, friends.”

Thunder blast, loud enough to shake the windows.

“What’s going on, Harry?” Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged and sighed in a *whatareyougonnado* kind of way. “Storm demon,” he said. “Putting a bit of a damper on things. I’m going to step outside and sort it out.”

“Harry!” Dumbledore began, but paused when sparkling emerald eyes met his own. There was power in those eyes, there always was. “Be... be careful. We will go together.”

After a moment Harry nodded, and along with Dumbledore half a dozen members of the Order followed him out of the house and into the dark Muggle street. Ron, Hermione and Ginny came as well over the protestations of Mrs Weasley.

The street lamps were still illuminated at this hour, when the sun should have been up for at least forty minutes. Harry took one look at the landscape and assessed the dangers in a heartbeat. There were no visible signs of this demon, save the massive storm clouds and the pulling he still felt. Muggles were looking out of their windows across the street, some shrugging it away as just a storm.

Without waiting, Harry set off down the street towards the Thames, the intensifying feeling in his stomach telling him it was that way. Grimmauld Place lay about a mile and a half from the Thames and the London Bridge, but Harry had definitely walked further before. He *felt* the Order draw their wands behind him. Apparently the need for secrecy dwindled

when there was a demon about to wreak havoc over the greater part of London.

“This isn’t wise, Harry,” Dumbledore said gravely. “We do not know what we are facing, nothing beyond rough legends. It may be *wise* to retreat until we know more.”

Harry listened – the man was older than him and could possibly know more about some things like this – but was shaking his head before the end. “People could die while we *study* it, Professor. Muggles who cannot even begin to defend themselves against something this magical. I’m sorry, but I’m diving headfirst into it without looking... I don’t ask you to come with me.”

Dumbledore sighed, it sounded almost like a sigh of defeat. *Surely not.* “There are things I believe you may need to tell me if we are to work together once again.”

Harry nodded, just as the first bolt of lightning tore down through the magnificent and terrible cloud base. He saw it fall in almost slow motion, and felt the splinters of rock and concrete that burst up from the pavement in front of him when the bolt struck not ten feet away. It was powerful.

Harry walked on regardless as the Order, Dumbledore and his friends came to a halt in surprise. The next bolt was in the garden on his right, closer, and the third struck the roof of a parked car on his left – again closer. This made Harry pause and he looked up to the sky in anticipation, flexing his fingers.

When it happened it happened in the blink of an eye.

Another bolt of lightning struck down from the sky, complete with the loudest burst of thunder yet, and instead of dissipating when it struck the earth, this bolt *wrapped* itself around Harry’s waist and flung him high into the air, as if he were attached to a rope.

There was a blinding flash of light, Harry screamed as the power ripped into him around his waist and he was lifted from the pavement and *thrown* across the sky. He heard Ginny scream his name in the one

instant he had before his feet left the ground.

The current running through him seared his body and he forced his power into deflecting it, absorbing it, anything to stop the pain. His eyes were watering and air was rushing by his ears so fast that when his vision cleared he realised he was a good half a mile above London, no longer wrapped in the lightning, and falling.

Bugger, he thought as he gazed down at the amazing array of lighting that was London. Street lights, car headlights, building lights. He even glimpsed a jumbo jet across the way at Heathrow, coming in to land. Amazing that it had come through the storm unscathed, but then again the demon was concentrated on Harry and Harry alone.

Meanwhile, he was still free falling towards death unless he did something fast. Despite the clouds, the darkness was not absolute in the sky. A pale predawn light shone over on the horizon but only just. It gave a grey definition to London beneath him. Shivering from the cold at this height, Harry continued to fall.

The Thames winded its way through London beneath him, he could see it clearly, and the London Bridge looked like a good landing platform at this height. Suddenly, lightning once again began to shoot down at him from within the clouds, and Harry spun so he fell back first to face it.

His palms shone with light almost as bright as the sun as he deflected the lightning-fast lightning. Blue bolts ricocheting of his half sphere shield dissipated in the air and a great roar, not thunder, rumbled up in those dark clouds and the lightning stopped. Harry grinned, turned around again, and held his arms close against his body, shooting for the London Bridge.

He picked up speed fast, the air streaming over his sleek form and found he couldn't keep his eyes open from the wind. Blind now, Harry spun wildly in the air, feeling dizzy and nauseous he forced his eyes open to find he was not so far above the concrete jungle of the city anymore. The London Bridge was a little to his left, he saw, before the air forced him around once again to face the clouds.

That was when he saw his latest enemy.

Almost like a mist, or fog, was gathering in a point beneath the thick ceiling of darkness. Seething into one point and growing into something terrible, one of the real nightmares. The mist became a long point, almost like a spike, and then broke away from the clouds and began its short plummet to the earth.

Harry's eyes narrowed but he couldn't do anything about it now – not and still survive his fall. His griffin earring caught the light of London below as he, with a thought he hadn't thought since he lost the ability to transform to a vampire one hundred years ago, pushed a button in his mind and transformed in the blink of an eye into a rippling mass of muscle and power – the griffin.

Harry screeched, his eagle's eyes enhancing his vision, and folded his wings up and behind, catching the airflow. Pressure created a suction of sorts on the top of his wings, and this gave him lift as he arced in the sky towards the busy bridge over the Thames.

He came down softly between the two towers of the bridge, which was itself illuminated against this darkness that had stolen the dawn. Muggles and cars packed the bridge so Harry transformed back into himself instantly. Despite the light on the bridge it was dark enough to not have been seen and he soon found himself in a crowd of frightened and awestruck people looking up at the plummeting spike of mist.

A wave of cold preceded it. *A rush of cold preceded it.* Demons, it was always a demon.

"Bloody hell," a tall man on Harry's left said. "What the bleeding hell is that?"

Screams – screams haunted Harry.

"That's not normal," a young woman said, unconsciously standing behind Harry. Perhaps, on some level, she sensed he could protect her.

The cars on the bridge had come to a complete stop and horns were blared, curses shouted and fists shaken, but eventually it gave way to staring at the falling spike of mist.

A few moments was all it took before the rush of cold air made everyone

on the bridge, save Harry, shiver. He was immune to hot and cold, pain and aches whilst holding his magic. At times he felt he could lose an arm in this state, and not feel it until he let go of the power. It wasn't a happy thought.

The spike of mist hit the water in the Thames at almost the speed of sound. The bridge shook when it hit so close and a shower of freezing water droplets burst up and over as the dozens of people lining the sides of the bridge dived for cover. Harry stepped forward towards the railing and looked over almost calmly into the rippling waves near the impact site.

It was about to get a lot colder.

The water froze in less than a second, leaving the rippling waves formed and half formed on the icy surface of the river. It was... beautiful, for use of a better word, strangely serene. The Thames shone like crystal, clear ice, smooth and unbroken. A thin layer of mist was gathering just beneath the bridge, on the edge of Harry's sight, and then all at once he felt his stomach groan with the evil that burst up and through the bottom of the bridge.

Cars and people went flying with twisted metal, broken asphalt, and shards of razor sharp ice. Harry ducked as a red vehicle, the people inside screaming, flew over him and broke through the railings of the bridge, metal screeching on metal and then rose as the car struck the compacted ice so many feet below.

Chaos erupted and Harry was pushed and shoved through the raging, screaming crowd towards the broken gap in the railing. He groaned and forged a shield behind himself to stop them pushing him off as well as others, and caught sight of other falling objects ahead of him in the pale grey sky.

Cars and people – innocents.

Pushing his arms forward on the precipice of the bridge, Harry caught the cars and falling victims with his power and lowered them slowly to the frozen river. There was a good half a dozen he didn't catch, but he had long ago accepted that he couldn't save everyone. Not for lack of

trying, it was just one of those things that simply was.

Darkslayer.

Harry spun on the spot as he heard the voice in his head and was confronted with a shadowy mist that enveloped him quickly, drenching him with cold moist air. His hair sparkled with dew drops and visibility dropped to next to nothing. It felt very cold though, extremely cold, but Harry *couldn't* feel it – was merely aware of it. His power kept him warm as it surged through his every vein.

The same could not be said for the people that had been on the bridge though, and as Harry stepped forward he encountered the first one – no longer running – but frozen on the spot, one leg raised and terror in her eyes. In an instant, less than an instant – always fast – the middle of the bridge had become an icy tomb.

Darkslayer.

Harry was drawn to the voice in a fury. Again his war had given death to those unlucky enough to get in the way. It wasn't fair, damn it, it just wasn't. If there was a Creator, out there somewhere, Harry was certain he would be His enemy. What God could allow this?

The concrete was slick and covered in a layer of clear ice beneath his feet so Harry stepped carefully. His breath was caught on the air and he made sure he walked around every frozen body, not disturbing them in the least – it was all he could do for them now. Car windows spider-webbed and exploded from the cold around him but the glass did little damage.

Eventually he came to a hole in the centre of the bridge, twisted and corrugated metal stuck up from underneath the structure and a rain of concrete had fallen in a wide rim around the centre. It was also slick with ice.

Potter....

One thing had stuck with Harry across Existence, one fact that had remained unchangeable no matter when or where he was – he *knew*, without doubt, that he was a formidable opponent to anything. For some

reason, he had the power to destroy worlds, or perhaps create them, and it wasn't arrogance that drove him on, nor ignorance for that matter – he just knew that anything that went up against him was likely to lose.

It was a simple fact – a truth. Nothing had proven it false yet.

So when Harry turned in a blur, towards the source of that voice as he could feel it, he did not expect to have to put up much fight. Maybe he was overconfident, a little too sure of himself, but that surety was lost when a fist of ice was thrown into his face, cracking his recently healed nose and throwing him back over the hole in the bridge.

Harry grunted, that was all, as blood streamed down his face and he impacted against a frozen car, occupants equally frozen, and it shattered, splintered against his back. The air was so cold it was hard to draw breath but Harry managed a few gulps before something shot after him across the gap in the bridge, spinning through the air and leaving a trail of crystal sparks.

Harry had yet to truly see his enemy, in its real form, but was ready for anything. The drill of ice, the spike spinning towards him was screaming, screeching, swirling mist around itself when Harry, still with his back in the car, raised his glowing palms and fired a bar of liquid hot fire towards it.

The spike began to melt but also began to push Harry's bar of power back towards him, into his palms. Surprised at its strength, Harry intensified his own blast but only just managed to hold his ground as the force began to move him and the splintered car back towards the other lane of frozen traffic.

It has Voldemort's strength, or some of it, Ethan gasped. It may even be as strong as Allarius....

Harry swore. That battle had destroyed a world, destroyed didn't even begin to describe it. The world had simply ceased to exist, blinked out of existence – its thread in the fabric burnt away. *That* would not happen here. Harry would tear a hole in reality and send it somewhere else if it came to that, although he wasn't sure he could close it... caught between a rock and a hard place.

Mere inches separated the spike of ice and Harry's glowing bar of power. The ice was melting; boiling water hit Harry's jeans, blistering his skin before freezing again instantly. He stopped moving with the car after a few moments, as he was frozen to the bridge. Palms still aglow with the fury of the sun, he screamed and pushed forward with his arms, just as the last of the swirling ice spike melted away.

For an instant after it was gone he caught a glimpse through the parted mist of a creature with glowing palms, snarling and hideous, before the fog rolled in again and obscured everything.

There was electricity in the air a moment later, Harry felt it before he saw it, and winced as lightning began to crackle inside of this mist. His legs were numb, coated and frozen to the bridge under several inches of ice. Linking his hands, he drove them into the ice holding him, which cracked, allowing him to roll away just a second before a bolt of lightning cut a hole straight through the bridge where he had been trapped.

"You'll have to do better than that," he grumbled, casting a warming charm on his legs so they would work again.

You've been in worse situations than this, Ethan whispered encouragement. All of the people here are dead – try superheating the air. This storm demon seems to prefer ice.

Harry nodded in agreement to the voice only he could hear. He had been thinking along the same lines. Standing on shaky legs he dodged another bolt of lightning. Well, got lucky in avoiding it anyway, as they were moving too fast to intentionally dodge. The icy frozen bodies were exploding under the barrage of lightning as well, silent statues shattering away to nothing. It made for a shower of razor sharp ice. Harry's exposed skin was cut to shreds on his arms, and one long jagged piece took him down the back, tearing open his thin polo shirt.

He felt nothing – was again simply aware that it *had* happened. He would feel it later.

There were sirens in the distance, off ahead of him through the fog. Obviously someone had called the Muggle emergency services – they were just lambs to the slaughter. Harry raised his palms into the freezing

mist and, with a thought, poured heat from his hands. Steam, or something similar, surged from his palms and battled the cold mist.

Compressing air, of course, raised its temperature – and Harry did that next, pushing a parcel of air to its smallest possible size in the air and then igniting it, using the liquid metal from the searing girders as combustion fuel. Safe behind half a shield, Harry increased the pressure until the bridge itself groaned, and then exploded into a maelstrom of fire and heat.

Superheated air and balls of fire tore through the ice, melting it instantly and annihilating anything in its path – thankfully nothing alive – leaving burnt out husks of automobiles and other debris. The silvery mist disappeared and the stormy sky became visible once again.

Across the way, standing on the roof of what remained of a car, a thin figure with a face of fury screamed then threw itself towards Harry. Ready for it, Harry drove his fist into its face, hit nothing but air even though he made contact, and fell to the ground wrapped in a misty substance – the demon.

It was made of air, or ice, or the mist – Harry wasn't sure which, but it seemed he could not physically damage it. Never one to be discouraged, Harry began to weave slices of power through the mist as he grappled with the monster on the scorched concrete. At times it seemed to have a face, at others it was just mist – or a block of ice. Pale grey eyes met Harry's own every now and again, and its rough mist face was grotesque, hideous and its very breath was ice.

Your place is to die, its voice spoke in his mind. And the thing and Harry spoke no more.

Harry sighed, rolling in the mist and heaving as it threw him up and over himself. He tried to remember what it had felt like *never* to have a voice in his head, and couldn't, it had been so long. The creature was holding him up in the air with tendrils of fog, wrapping them tightly around his waist and throat, pulling at his face, clawing at him – trying to kill him.

A lot had tried to kill him.

Heat! Ethan screamed. *HEAT!*

Easier said than done. One of Harry's arms was wrapped tightly with his palm pressing down into his chest, the other caught against his leg. If he generated heat with his power he would incinerate himself. The mist spun him, tightening as it wrapped him closer and closer to death.

Harry had a wager with death, even if Death did not know it, and it wasn't yet time to call that bet.

He fought like hell, twisting and turning, screaming and thrashing until his legs found a hold on the ground. He pushed himself up and back, breaking through the mist and flipping in the air as he rode up the tendrils and landed in a heap in the dirty ash of the bridge strut.

Not wasting a second, Harry's palms exploded as he compressed the mist down and poured power into its form. The thing writhed and screamed against Harry's power, looking for a gap away from the steam. It sizzled and burned, twisted and cried. The ground beneath Harry's feet cracked as he pushed it further down, raising its temperature – and it was this that let it escape.

The pressure was released downwards but the energy had to go somewhere, and it went up, taking the storm demon with it. Harry was thrown backwards and once more went head over heels as the creature shot back into the sky in an apocalyptic fury, its cries piercing the heavens.

Breathing heavily, hand on his chest; Harry managed to sit up and glare at the roiling thunderclouds that now seemed to be swaying, chaos barraging them as lightning burst in their centre, shining blue through the darkness. It wasn't over, not yet. Halftime.

“HARRY!”

Rising to his feet, Harry turned to see Dumbledore, the Order, Ron, Hermione and Ginny running towards him, diving through the cars that remained, moving passed the seared tower on the left side of the bridge. It was on fire, in parts, and off in the distance Harry could see the flashing sirens of the emergency services. He felt a pang of regret for the

damage caused, and for the loss of life, but it was fleeting. He did what he had to do, that had been driven into him a long time ago.

"It got away," Harry shrugged as the Order, with Dumbledore at their head, drew level to him. They gazed around at the destruction wide-eyed, and at Harry equally so. One or two of the members looked as though they were going to be sick. Bodies must still exist further on down the bridge. Probably burnt to a crisp by his heat wave. They would have been frozen to death anyway.

"We didn't know what to think," Hermione said, breathing heavily. "You-You were just pulled up into the sky, and—"

"I landed on my feet," Harry smiled, keeping one eye on the storm. The pull in his stomach was still there, his enemy still alive.

"Your power has grown, Harry," was all Dumbledore said. He looked fearful, eyeing Harry warily.

"What happened here?" Ginny asked next, wrapping her cloak closer around herself and shivering. "There was a mist, and then fire. We ran all the way here, Harry. You don't look to well."

Harry blinked and looked down at himself. Once again his jeans and shirt were in tatters, his shirt just barely clinging to his form. His arms were cut and a sharp lance of pain worked its way up his back. His nose was numb, possibly broken, and his arms were cut in at least a dozen places.

"That's a bloody understatement," Ron exclaimed, clapping Harry on the shoulder. "You alright, mate?"

"Just a few scratches," Harry mumbled. Never, not once, in at least eighty years, had anyone been there to ask him about his injuries. It just hit him then, again, he was home with people who cared about him. There had been so much time spent alone, fighting darkness, and licking his wounds afterwards alone.

"Here," Ginny said, drawing her wand from the holster on her right wrist. She pressed the tip gently against his arm. "*Curatio!*" A warm buzz enveloped his arm and many of the cuts sealed over cleanly. Ginny did

the same for his other arm and for the deep one on his back. It left a dull ache, but nothing more.

“Thank you,” he whispered, brushing her smooth hand with his calloused one briefly and meeting her eyes. A roll of deafening thunder broke the moment.

“What is it, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head, joining the headmaster in gazing up at the tainted sky. “A demon, a powerful monster,” he sighed. *When would it be over?* “The storm demon, Professor. It’s real.”

Dumbledore’s face darkened and he looked old, very old. “Can you... can you stop it?” he asked quietly, trying not to look at the destruction surrounding them all.

Without destroying the world?

“Yes,” he replied. “Yes I can.”

Harry stepped away from the group; his tattered shirt blowing in the wind and faced what he felt was the eye of the storm, the most intense part of the evil. His eyes sparkling was the only warning he gave before raising his palms towards the sky and unleashing liquid fire in a long beam into the heavens.

Dumbledore and the others stepped back in surprise and shock, some falling over their own feet as the air became charged with magic. They could taste it. The white hot beam of power pierced the clouds, cutting right through and leaving a gap of light. Harry’s power faded but a thin beam of sunlight remained, tracing its path and shining on Harry – giving him an almost ethereal glow.

The solitary beam of sunlight did not last long before the clouds smothered it and then erupted in a blue streak of lightning that, halfway down to the earth, began to glow red – blood-red. Two forks of the lightning sizzled through the air towards Harry on the bridge, but he was ready for them this time.

Bracing himself, palms glowing once again, Harry moved in a blur as the

thousand foot long crackles of power whipped the bridge, attempting to cleave him in two. The other wanted to wrap itself around him, but Harry had had enough of that nonsense and *caught* the blazing lightning in his hand, not feeling the jolt he was expecting. He did the same for the other massive strap of power and held on tight.

Ginny watched amazed as Harry actually managed to grasp the red lightning, and her wide eyes followed the thrashing forks up into the dark clouds thousands of feet over head. They spun in the clouds, like tentacles, but Harry held tight.

Not knowing what else to do, the Order just stepped back, casting protection charms and shields over themselves. They couldn't fight like Harry.

Harry snarled, gritting his teeth and *pulled* back against the lightning he held. He managed a few steps back cross the bridge, pulling the lightning as if it were rope. It was heavy, impossibly so, and his magic spread from his palms to envelope his arms, eating away at his already tattered shirt. Leaning back, he continued to pull on the forks of red power.

Ginny stood in between Ron and Hermione in awe as the clouds, high in the sky, began to *bend* towards Harry, like a bubble being stretched. The two tendrils of red lightning were the key and Harry was actually pulling the clouds out of the sky. A long jagged tear appeared in the otherwise whole clouds and sunlight streamed in, highlighting the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. It was four minutes past nine in the morning.

Harry didn't realise he was screaming as the strain became enormous, the power inside of him so strong and sweet, making him feel more alive than he ever had. The strength in the lightning was also powerful and it wanted to pull him apart, and could if he slipped for even an instant. It was like a tug of war, one that he intended to win.

No longer able to take a step back, Harry strained to hold his ground against the awesome storm. His muscles were pulled taut, right to the point of breaking as the power tried to lash him apart. He didn't know what to do, let go and suffer the backlash, or hold on and suffer the backlash. It wasn't a win-win situation.

I'm told old for this crap, he thought with a grin.

A moment later the choice was made for him, and his eyes widened in surprise as he felt the flow of power in the lightning change. Instead of trying to pull him apart, the flow changed and pulled him *up*. "Oh shit," he whispered, as he felt a weight crash into his chest and his feet leave the ground. Harry was sling-shotted into the sky yet again, except this time he didn't go alone.

Ginny realised what was about to happen a few moments before it actually did, and throwing all caution to the wind she rushed forward, pushing by Hermione and Dumbledore and racing across the expanse of the bridge towards Harry. She threw her arms around his waist, hoping to hold him down, and screamed when she blinked and was suddenly hundreds of feet above a fast-shrinking London. Her grip around Harry became iron as the wind whirled around her ears.

Harry gritted his teeth as he held the red lightning and smiled darkly. *So be it*, he thought. He would kill the thing at its source. Or that was the plan, until he looked down to see Ginny with her arms wrapped tightly around his waist, her eyes closed and holding on for dear life.

Harry didn't hesitate in letting go of one of the forks of power. He reached down and grasped her upper arm as hard as he could, even though it would hurt her. She would not fall! His arms felt like lead after pulling against the clouds but he managed to stay strong. The final fork of lightning swung both of them across the sky and up into the dark clouds as the power in it retreated.

They entered the clouds and were lost from sight in the smoky dark haze of this evil creation. The whiplash of the lightning as it dissipated made sure they continued on through the cloud at over four hundred miles per hour, breaking through the other side and into dazzlingly bright sunlight.

After the morning of darkness, the clear blue summer sky on this side of the clouds was so bright it became blinding, and Harry closed his eyes against it as they were propelled higher and higher into thinner, colder air. He pulled Ginny up and wrapped his arms around her back, she did the same. They rested their heads on their shoulders and wrapped their legs tightly together, getting as close as they could.

Harry shivered; he could feel Ginny shivering as the air grew even colder, thinner, and his eyes almost refused to open. Ginny's auburn hair was speckled with snow and frozen water droplets. They were dying, he knew, from a lack of oxygen and warmth.

With a thought, Harry summoned into existence an invisible spherical shield around both of them, which hung in the air and stopped their rising any further into the unforgiving sky. The 'bubble' shield was suspended in the air and he and Ginny fell to the bottom of it. It was like sitting on glass, thirty five thousand feet above the earth.

Inside the air was still cold and much too thin to breathe, so Harry heated it carefully and compressed the air until it was at the same pressure as if he had been standing in Grimmauld Place. Almost immediately he took a big gulp of the fresh air and Ginny did the same as they moved apart a few inches.

Smiling as Ginny opened her eyes and the frost that had developed on her eyelashes melted away, Harry lifted a strand of her hair back behind her ear carefully, as if he were afraid to damage it. "It might be a good idea not to look down," he whispered gently as their eyes met. They still held each other closely.

Of course, Ginny did look down through the bottom of the invisible shield and screamed, grabbing Harry tightly again. "Merlin...." she breathed, shivering again – not from the cold. "What...? Harry... Merlin...."

Harry chuckled. "Gin, it's okay," he said. "You're safe... sort of...."

Harry looked down through the shield at the storm clouds so many thousands of feet below and scowled. They covered the sky as far as he could see in any direction. They had to be destroyed.

Ginny had paled considerably when she looked up at Harry and saw the determination in his eyes. He wasn't frightened in the least – what had happened to him that made fearless? No fear whatsoever? Something terrible, she was sure. "I think I'd like to get down now, Harry," she managed, even chuckling slightly.

"I bet you never saw this coming when you woke up this morning," he

replied. The clear sky seemed to go on forever until it hit the edge of the dark clouds on the curvature of the planet, the horizon, and then it seemed to fade and die.

“No,” she agreed. “It’s a long way down.”

“That it is.”

Some colour had returned to Ginny’s cheeks now and she actually began to look excited. “This is just a regular day-to-day thing for you, isn’t it?” she asked him with a grin.

Harry nodded with a shrug. “One wonder in one world amongst millions, Gin. If we stick together you’ll see a lot more than this. I guarantee it.”

You’d open the way between worlds for her? Ethan asked.

For her, anything.

“I’d stay with you anyway,” she sighed, and as one they both became aware of how close they were together in this invisible sphere. Legs entangled, arms around one another – it felt completely natural but it made them both blush suddenly.

Harry had, despite his long years, no experience with women – not in these situations and he found himself at a loss for words. His mouth worked soundlessly for a moment, Ethan laughed and Ginny looked at him expectantly. Her eyes uncertain and yet... anxious, no....

Kiss her, you moron, Ethan urged, and Harry felt him roll his eyes and throw up his arms in despair before ‘walking’ away.

Harry did, without another thought or moment of hesitation, and forgot everything about where he was and what he was doing as he pressed his lips against Ginny’s. One hundred years apart suddenly meant nothing, distance crumbled and memory came crashing down of their first kiss, atop of the Astronomy Tower three or so months ago.

Mouths opened and tongues danced, time lost all meaning (as it always seemed to) and they could have been anywhere – even high in the sky. Harry saw white roses before he opened his eyes, at the same time

Ginny did, and sighed. He felt... refreshed, alive.

"Harry...." Ginny whispered. "I love—"

BOOM!

Harry sensed it too late. His shield exploded and he and Ginny were flung apart across the sky, a red fork of lightning cutting up higher between them. He swore and spun in the air, falling fast and further away from Ginny – who could do nothing but fall – and for the first time he could remember, Harry feared what could now happen. Ginny could die....

The red lightning whipped around and before he could do anything it snapped him up, ignoring Ginny completely and began to surge into him, killing him. He screamed from the electric shock before filling himself with power and numbing the pain. He did it only on reflex, and that reflex kept him alive another minute.

Beneath him the storm clouds were moving again, swirling and churning almost like a whirlpool, and it was this that the lightning tendril pulled him down towards. Harry had eyes only for Ginny though, a few hundred feet further down, flailing wildly, and a few hundred feet further across. Fear, a foreign emotion, clawed at his heart.

He struggled in vain against the power that held him, twisting in its grasp and trying unsuccessfully to break free. He had to reach Ginny – had to! She could do nothing, nothing at all but fall to her death. He was terrified for her.

Harry... roared, there was no other word for it – and at that moment it was clear to Ethan why nothing that Harry had faced over the long years had managed to kill him. It wasn't strength, nor his will to survive or battle skill – it was love, pure and simple, when all the glamour was stripped away that was what was left – it was the core, the soul, of him... all that mattered.

And there is no greater weapon in all of Existence than the *human* soul on fire – enflamed with the love we are capable of.

Harry roared, and a wave of pure power burst from him in all directions – shattering the lightning. Flipping in the air, Harry streamlined himself against the flow and blazed down and across the sky towards Ginny. Nothing else mattered and never would – he'd let the world burn for her smile.

They were no longer thousands of feet above the dark clouds; they were almost on top of them. Harry was certain that if she entered those clouds he would lose her – forever. It was an inexplicable feeling but one he knew to be true. He screamed, and power burst from his hands which he held behind his back. A trail of amazing silver light propelled Harry forward and he broke the sound barrier, the shockwave reverberating across the sky.

It would come down to the edge, as these things had a way of doing. The air burned behind him and he didn't care, couldn't care – Ginny would not die today. An inferno a mile high followed his trail and the thin fabric that separated worlds and realities almost fell away – almost.

Skimming across the top of the clouds, Harry created a rift several miles wide that followed him, and he broke away with the power just as Ginny reached the clouds, screaming, and flung his arms forward – scooping her up and dodging a dozen sudden tendrils of red lightning.

Harry raised his head and chest and spun on the air, holding Ginny tight, before diving down into the clouds on the last dregs of his power. For a second he had a glimpse of the fiery sky he had left in his wake, and did not care. Then the blackness of the smoky clouds obscured everything. Invisible hands clawed at Harry in the clouds and he fended them off, expecting at any moment to fall out the other side. He did not panic when he didn't.

Willing to expect anything at this point, Harry only flinched slightly when his scar burst open for the first time in a century and blood dripped down into his eyes. He knew nothing, the pain wasn't numbed by his power, and all he did was hold Ginny close – all he could do as he could not stop the tears anymore.

There was a blinding white light, a tremendous roar that wasn't the wind rushing by his ears, and then he was lying on *something* in another white

mist – except it wasn't cold this time. Ginny was by his side and he cradled her close as she sniffed. They hadn't fallen to the ground, that was still at least eight thousand feet away, *at least*.

So where am I? His scar burnt furiously, and it only did that when Voldemort—

Harry rose to his feet in a blur and spun on the spot, already throwing his strength forward as the storm demon, its misty form snarling at him, charged towards him across the white expanse of this... place in the sky.

Fury – they both held it as Ginny moaned on the ground at Harry's feet. Jumping forward to meet it, Harry trapped the misty demon in a cage of indestructible power and pushed it hard, raising the temperature as he landed on the invisible shield. The thing inside clawed at him and spat, its breath ice against the barrier. Harry pushed harder and poured liquid fire into the shield, holding it under his palms as it grew smaller and smaller – more compressed.

The demon screamed, an unholy screech that tugged at Harry's very soul. On the ground, still shaking, Ginny covered her ears and her own scream was drowned out in the flames of the demon.

It was dying, dying... the scream abruptly cut off, and he breathed easier for a time. He didn't see the clouds disappear over London, but he felt it from wherever he was here.

"Well done, Harry," a snake-like voice hissed from behind him, near Ginny, and suddenly it felt as if an icy hand was gripping his heart.

A few words floated unbidden through his mind... *it will never be over*.

Harry stood slowly, with a calm he did not feel, and turned to meet Lord Voldemort for the first time in one hundred years.

Ron had been left holding Hermione on the bridge as Ginny and Harry disappeared up and through the dark clouds. Left in shock as Dumbledore and the Order were powerless to do anything. They stood there, wands hanging uselessly at their sides as the Muggle emergency

services poured onto the bridge at either end.

Looking left and right across the frozen Thames towards the banks of London on either side for anything to... to... *help*? He saw hundreds if not thousands of Muggles standing in the electric lights, gazing up at the ruined bridge. He wondered briefly, stupidly, how his dad would smooth *this* one over with the Muggle Prime Minister.

For a moment all he could hear were alarms and sirens wailing, but then Hermione was tugging on his arm and he realised quite a few minutes had past by without him noticing. Hermione was pointing up at the clouds, which Ron saw now seemed to be... burning. No, something behind them was.

He could see it clearly across the sky – there was a raging fire behind the clouds, making the black glow faintly red. He could almost feel the heat from here, the blaze was huge, and something told him it was Harry – could only be Harry.

A few minutes later, as everyone continued to stare up at the sky for any sign of either of them, Ron gasped and was thrown to the ground with thousands of others as, for some reason, the clouds *burst* and sunlight flooded in across a clear blue sky – save for one part which was still rimmed with fire and shone like a second sun.

He had to blink a few times until his eyes adjusted to the sudden sunlight. It was as if someone had simply turned a page in the sky, and the clouds were gone, at the speed of light, replaced with the sky – the beautiful sky, as it should be.

Harry, he thought, scanning the sky. *Ginny*... There was no sign of them, the sky was completely clear—

Hermione screamed and Ron did as well as, in a heartbeat, a figure appeared in the sky as tall as a giant and a thousand times more evil. Ron recognised... it... from when he had been a prisoner in the forest last March. Voldemort, He Who Must Not Be Named, stood in the sky, in a part that was washed white. He looked to be standing on the sky, hundreds of feet tall as he was.

A great cry went up from the Muggles and Ron saw members of the Order cowering with their mouths hanging open. A moment later and a thick darkness issued from the form of the Dark Lord, again threatening to block out the sun, but there was light to combat it – to fight it.

The same light that always had.

Harry appeared, hundreds of feet tall himself, and above them both sparks, tendrils, wisps of darkness and light threw themselves together and fought for dominance. It was terrible, awe-inspiring, as the two incarnations of Light and Dark met in the sky above London, and were seen by thousands for miles around.

Both worlds, Muggle and Magical, had become one.

It was then that they started to speak, and their voices reverberated like gongs across the tormented sky. What was said would change the world, forge it a new future through the blood and fires of war.

Harry's face was completely emotionless as he turned to meet Voldemort. He felt eerily calm, ready, in control. He did not know where he was, but felt as if he had stepped outside of reality for a moment – out of the first layer in the fabric of the world, the layer where everything existed. It was a trick Allarius had known for travelling unseen, but Harry was willing to bet he had never been this far back into the canvas of reality.

It was all white, completely blank – it was a blank canvas that an artist, a creator, drew a world upon. He had stepped, unintentionally with Voldemort, onto the foundations of his world. Perhaps the scar link had drawn them here, perhaps Voldemort had done it – no matter, Ginny had to be kept safe.

The air, if it was air, was chilled and Voldemort's eyes were blood red, his skin pale and clammy. The Dark Lord looked terrible, evil, like a demon. Black flecks of *something* moved across his fiery eyes, and between his fingers crimson power danced.

"You've done well, Harry," Voldemort hissed and his words felt like

something was pressing in Harry's mind, squashing his brain against the side of his skull – it made him want to scream, but he wouldn't. "Your power is extraordinary."

"Voldemort," he said, and blinked. So much of his life could be laid at this monster's feet. It was his fault he had been thrown into another world, all his fault. All of it, the pain, the anguish, the destruction – the power! It could all be traced back to him, Tom Marvolo Riddle – the Dark Lord Voldemort.

"Such a game we play, you and I," Voldemort whispered and still Harry wanted to scream from the pressure in his mind. It was torment, torture, pain – he wouldn't bend. "I feel as if the entire world is nothing more than a spectator to our fight."

Ginny crawled away from the creature that had ruined his life and Voldemort did not stop her. Harry helped her up and held her behind him, shielding her.

"And either must die at the hand of the other...." Harry replied, not thinking anymore. His palms shone briefly and then he drew *both* swords of Gryffindor, crossing them across his body. They glittered like crystal.

KILL HIM! Ethan screamed. He sounded insane, maddened by something. *AHH! POTTER, KILL HIM OR KILL YOURSELF! IT HURTSSSS!*

"In time, Harry, you will wish you died the first time we met on Halloween night sixteen years ago. This world will burn with your death. None will survive!"

Voldemort laughed and Harry almost fell to his knees – Ginny did, screaming again – but he was defiance, and would never kneel before this monster. He took a step forward, swinging the swords down in a symmetrical arc and bringing them to life with furious blue fire.

"*DIE!*" he roared and the world shook, swinging his swords around in his hands and bringing them to bear against Voldemort.

The Dark Lord smiled, showing fanged teeth, and his arms suddenly flowed with red light, burning away the arms of his black robes. Harry

blinked as his swords fell and suddenly two more, of red fire, countered his stroke. Voldemort had created his own scarlet weapons, and when the four blades met golden sparks lit up the world.

“One life, Potter,” Voldemort hissed, bringing his face mere inches away from Harry’s as they pushed equally against their swords with true power. “You have only one death to die – you can’t save all the fools of this world – choose which cause you die for.”

“I hate you....” Harry whispered, his eyes brimming with tears of pain and anger. “I will destroy you.”

“We shall see, Darkslayer,” Voldemort replied, his voice rising so high that Harry thought his skull might explode. Light flashed past his eyes in a blur, a rainbow of colours, and he fought with every fibre of his being just to stay alive. “All souls will be forfeit soon, Harry, remember that.”

“IT WILL BE OVER SOON!” Harry roared, and broke away with his swords. “IT WILL END!”

His scar *ran* with blood as the Dark Lord disappeared in a swirl of hideous laughter and contempt, and the next moment, as Harry threw himself at Ginny, the white world disappeared and the real one returned. He was at eight thousand feet or so, above London and the sun was shining strongly in a cloudless sky.

His right eye was drowning in blood from his scar and he felt utterly defeated. There was only so much he could take. *Everything had a limit.* He wanted to sleep for a month. Wrapping his arms tightly around Ginny once again, he blinked and looked at the fast-approaching city for just a moment before Apparating away.

He appeared where it had all began that morning, in Grimmauld Place. Harry, holding Ginny close, landed softly on his bed on the second floor of the house. She was unconscious, bruised and battered, but breathing slowly. Harry relaxed and then drifted towards sleep in her arms. He shed one tear, for what had been and for what was to come.

The single tear cut a trail through the blood on his face and fell away onto his pillow.

“Wake me up before it ends,” he whispered, almost pleadingly, lost in one thought or another. “My soul is tired... I want to rest.”

His dreams were untroubled, and were spent trying to remember the small boy who, six years ago (one hundred and six), had held an amazing innocence and wonderment at this world of magic that had opened up before him. He tried to remember a normal life as the young wizard Harry Potter, and found it beyond his reach.

“IT WILL END!”

Hermione shivered at the power and fury on Harry’s face and in his eyes that were beyond emeralds in that sparkling magic-filled sky. Sunlight streamed in behind the two figures high in the sky, and it seemed to surround Harry whilst Voldemort’s darkness destroyed it.

The *vision* faded away a moment later and Hermione picked out a small object falling out of the sky beneath where it had been, and instinctively knew it was Harry. She couldn’t see Ginny and did not have a chance for a closer look as, a moment later, the figure disappeared.

Hermione stood, holding Ron’s hand, and gazed at the sky for a few minutes longer, wondering if it was over. All around her she saw Muggles, on the banks of the fast melting Thames, on the chaos-wrought bridge itself – everywhere. All gazing at the sky and struggling to understand.

Fantasy had just become reality.

Something grave had happened today, and she did not know what – only that her best friend was at the centre of it, swirling and battling with powers that could destroy him. She shivered again... when she remembered Voldemort....

These truly were the final days, the world itself rested on the edge of a knife, and Harry – just Harry – was all that stood between it and total annihilation.

She was crying in Ron’s arms before she knew anything else, and he

silently over her shoulder.

Chapter 9 – A Toss of the Dice

There is no chance, no destiny, no fate, that can hinder or control the firm resolve of a determined soul.

~~Wilcox

“What did we see today, Albus?” Remus Lupin asked Dumbledore.

They were sitting alone with Harry in his room; he had fallen into a deep sleep on his bed next to Ginny. She had woken up an hour ago, had needed a few scrapes healing, and had gone off to lunch with Ron and Hermione in somewhat of a daze.

It had been five hours since the amazing battle in the sky. Five hours since every Muggle in the country and probably very soon the world became aware that there were things in their world beyond all reason and understanding, hiding just in the shadows and spiriting themselves away in the corner of the eye. The Ministry, all Ministries, could do nothing to censor this display of magic.

It was, put simply, too big.

Being reported on the Muggle radio and on pictures and film captured by their cameras, broadcast across the planet – the wizarding war against Voldemort had suddenly become very, very public. Of course the magical world wasn't about to come forward and explain everything to

the Muggles – they'd just let them draw their own conclusions.

As it stood though, the Minister, Arthur Weasley, was currently with the British Prime Minister at Downing Street after the man had called a state of emergency after the little incident on the London Bridge, in which one hundred and twelve Muggles had died and Harry and Voldemort had appeared in the sky.

Dumbledore had explained that most Magical leaders were meeting with their Muggle counterparts as they spoke. This was the biggest breach of wizarding security since... well, ever, and they were scared. Voldemort was something to fear, but at least the wizarding world knew why they feared him. Billions of Muggles just saw a monster that was fear.

"I believe, Remus," Dumbledore said slowly, staring without blinking at Harry. "We saw magic beyond our understanding...."

"Do you think Harry knows what happened?" the ex-werewolf asked, looking healthier everyday. The grey in his hair had melted away, his eyes were strong and a lot more confident and a lot less... wolfish.

Dumbledore hesitated. "More than we do...." he managed after a moment.

Harry moaned in his sleep, tossing slightly on the bed as a beam of sunlight streamed in silently through the open window, casting him in a strange glow. Remus found it hard to believe that the sky had been darker than night a few hours ago. That was another thing the Muggles feared now about today. Abnormal weather... magical weather.

Remus shook his head as he beheld the tired teenager on the bed. His shirt had been removed so Dumbledore could get to his wounds beneath it, and it had made Remus shudder and wince when he entered the room. The scars on Harry's body truly were terrible, especially that one on his shoulder. Some of them were beyond explanation though... it was odd.

Remus had seen Harry in the sky against Voldemort, and at a few

moments he had almost feared him as much as he had Voldemort. There was defiance... yes, that was the word, in Harry's eyes, a power that spoke of something more than they all could see or even understand. His voice had boomed across the sky:

IT WILL END!

And Remus had almost wept at that. It seemed to have a different meaning than he knew Harry intended it for. For a moment, he had felt that *everything* would end – life itself, this world, time and fate... destiny and existence. It was an amazing feeling, a terrifying one, and it only lasted for a second. It had been, at the time, like he had been given a glimpse of the future... or picked up a thought from Harry or something.

Another thing beyond explanation.

Yet Harry really was all they had against Voldemort now – that much was clear. He had surpassed them all in magic and perhaps, for some reason, skill in battle. There were not many people Remus knew that could *catch* lightning and bend the very clouds in the sky, or light that same sky on fire. In fact, he was looking at the only person who could – just Harry.

One boy, his best friend's son, with the weight of truly awful choices bearing him down – crushing him into the earth.

What choice did they have, anymore, but to trust Harry and hope for the best.... none at all.

Something is wrong when the fate of our world comes down to a sixteen year old boy, Remus thought glumly. *Very wrong.*

"If the world doesn't know he's back, Albus," Remus said, "they will as soon as the *Prophet* can release their evening edition. What do we do now?"

Dumbledore heaved a sigh. It was rare that he did such a thing. "We face it as it comes, my friend... as it comes. Everything is changing...." The

last was directed more towards himself.

Harry stirred again – he frowned while he was asleep – and showed a face he wouldn't let anyone see if he was awake. Even though he was sleeping, he looked tired. His face was creased, marred with what could have been pain. His emotions were open and bare, written clearly across his anguished grimace. There were nightmares there; Remus was sure, dark nightmares.

"The International Confederation still giving you grief?" Remus asked his old Headmaster.

Dumbledore nodded, almost absently. "I fear I am losing control in my seat there, Remus, I truly do. John Rafter has been gathering support against me, and against our efforts for declaring our war a world war. He is telling the other members what they want to hear – and it has always been human nature to take the easy way out."

Anger swam across Dumbledore's usually serene face for a moment and it looks like this that reminded Remus that the man was human, whatever his power, and that he was old, perhaps feeling the effects of his age, and that was not good. Dumbledore was... Dumbledore, and they needed him.

Harry on the other hand... well, if Dumbledore was Dumbledore then Harry was Harry. Two men who changed and had been changing the world all their lives. Without either of them Voldemort's victory was practically assured.

Harry was planning something though, and telling no one. An owl had arrived a few hours ago from Gringotts. The goblin seal on the letter told them that at least, and if Harry was doing business with the goblins this closely then large funds would be involved. Whatever it was... it would be against Voldemort.

"We have France behind us, and a few others," Remus said. "In time they'll all be dragged into it whether they believe us or not."

“If it happens that way, Remus, then we have lost. We need time to prepare, time to plan... and I... I see no other way of getting that than using Harry.”

“How?” Remus asked warily and then before he could stop himself added. “He’s been through enough.”

Dumbledore nodded, sighed again, and looked down at his linked palms. Too much to do, too little time.

Harry swam in dreams and power, floating in the abyss from which he could draw power enough to tear apart worlds – from which he had drawn power enough to destroy worlds – and he felt... calm. Yes, calm was what he felt.

His head buzzed, hummed, and he could see light – fading and rising, fading and rising – in the distance. A voice seemed to be speaking, whispering in his ear over the humming.

“One world,” it whispered.

Harry blinked and the universe moved, forming something new. He saw himself; he was floating in the sky looking down upon himself in some lesson at Hogwarts. Sirius was... was teaching. Yes, Sirius Black was teaching Transfiguration. Harry examined himself, noted the lack of lightning bolt scar on his forehead and frowned.

“One world, Darkslayer – one choice.”

For an instant he saw himself sitting at that desk, next to Neville – he looked a lot more innocent than he was used to. The universe moved again after that, colour swirling around him much like when using floo powder.

“Another choice.”

Again, there was no scar – but Voldemort was there, a more-human looking Voldemort. Harry floated above the scene; saw himself shaking with fear but standing nonetheless. Perhaps he always stood... maybe that was one choice that never changed. The location he didn’t know, someplace with high stone walls and an open ceiling looking out into a twilight sky.

That was another constant – the twilight.

“Avada Kedavra,” Voldemort spat. There was a blinding flash of light, Harry watched himself die, and the hope of this world was extinguished.

“One hope – one world – one Darkslayer,” that voice whispered in his ear. “You fight a war you cannot win, but can’t stop fighting.”

Trapped in the world of dreams, floating between realms of consciousness and life, Harry shook his head, if indeed he had a head. Looking down, he could not see his body. “I will win.”

The universe flowed, switched, moved, and another possible life unfolded before Harry’s eyes.

He had a scar; he had the scar, and was seated next to Ginny on the Hogwarts grounds, before a white tomb raised on a pedestal. All of Hogwarts was out there, along with many other witches and wizards. Hagrid sat at the back with... with Grawp, his giant brother. It was quiet, too quiet, and he caught glimpses of magical creatures in the forest and lake.

A funeral, he was sure, such events always had a certain... feel about them. This was a funeral... but whose?

And then it hit him – where was Dumbledore?

Surely not.

"We all die," the voice whispered, just as the white tomb burst with light and a barrage of arrows flew into the air out of the forest. "One choice, Darkslayer, has led you down many paths on your endless war."

"It won't be endless," Harry whispered as the world shuddered again. "I'll end all the wars...."

"The Stream and Boundary, several layers of many realities have begun to burn away once again," the voice whispered. Who was it? It sounded familiar, but then again not at all. Just a vague sense of... oneness. "Your heroism in reaching the Ways of Twilight was all for naught. You may as well have died."

Harry sighed. "But I didn't, I'm still alive – Death himself saw to that."

"One world is all that matters. The world that you are in, whether it be one or another, is all that matters. You stretch chance, destroy fate, what is left to do, save die?"

"I'm a survivor," Harry whispered. "Always the survivor."

Harry woke but did not open his eyes or give any sign that he had. He could hear voices in the room with him, familiar voices, and felt the absence of Ginny on his arm all in the first second of waking. Eyes closed, he recognised the voices as that of Dumbledore, Remus and.... who was it? It was... familiar.... Ah, Arthur Weasley. It was the Minister for Magic.

"How fared your meeting with the Muggle Prime Minister?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry couldn't see their faces, but felt their tension. They were all tired, all stressed.

"Terrible," Arthur sighed. "The man blames us, of course, our world... and he may be right to. He has millions of people asking questions,

demanding to know what happened, and we can't offer him a thing. He almost struck me."

"What did you tell him?" Remus said.

"The truth, Remus, or most of it," Arthur replied. "He knows that it means our war is heating up again. The man even suggested revealing the existence of our world, and working together in this fight against V-Voldemort. Can you imagine how many would die!? It sounded like more of a threat when he said it...."

"Too many," Dumbledore agreed, in response to the Muggle-death question. "We will not use the Muggles as cannon fodder...."

"Well the Muggle world is demanding answers, and they're turning to the leaders of their governments. What do we want them to say?" Arthur sounded like he was asking this of himself. He was, Harry realised. No one answered, and the silence stretched on for a long moment.

"The *Prophet* has been printing flat out for hours with this story, Albus," Arthur continued, as if the thought had just occurred to him. "Harry and You Know Who will be all over the world by six o'clock. How is he, by the way? Molly was fretting on my way up."

"Sleeping," Remus replied. "Not surprising either – who knows what the effect of using so much power is...."

"There will be owls in their hundreds after him," Dumbledore said next. "It may be best if you can arrange a meeting with the *Prophet* for him, Arthur. Best the world learns he's alive and well – and willing to fight this fight, as terrible as that is."

Harry agreed with that – he wanted Voldemort to know he was not afraid, and that a war was coming against him. He would not have this world without one hell of a fight! But he'd do it his way.

"Anyway," Mr Weasley said, "I managed to handle the Prime Minister

well enough. He knows what he needs to know.”

Now, Harry wasn't sure he agreed with that. With the right use, the Muggles would make an effective army against the forces Voldemort was gathering. Harry didn't know what Voldemort wanted anymore – supreme domination or total destruction – perhaps both, but he knew it would not just be him and the Dark Lord fighting. Armies would rise and fall over the next few months.

And I need thousands of men, Harry thought. Hundreds of thousands. Again, if I mix magic and Muggle weaponry... the Muggles would at least stand a chance then.

There were also the concerns over Voldemort's power levels, which were skyrocketing. Harry wasn't certain who had pulled who into the sky that morning, but they had both survived – Voldemort had enough strength to be on par with Allarius, more even, but he didn't know how to use it all effectively yet... but there were hazards in attacking early as well. Too many hazards.

What if he lost? What if Voldemort fled Slytherin Fortress and took up residence else where? No, it was safer to know where he was and do nothing for now – safer, but frustrating, for the entire world.

Harry opened his eyes and blinked against the rush of clear sunlight, rolling over with a groan; he coughed into his hand and sighed all at once. He had the aching limbs that he had always associated with using a lot of magic. His bones hurt, his shoulder hurt, and his scar had been maintaining a constant slight prickling for the last five minutes.

“Good afternoon, Harry,” Dumbledore said with his infinitely calm face. “I must say it was a relief to find you here after the... incident.”

“Where's Ginny?” Harry croaked, hand over his eyes. “Ron and Hermione? Is everyone okay?”

“They are fine, Harry,” Dumbledore said gently. “They are enjoying their

lunch.”

Harry nodded and threw the covers off himself and spun on the bed, dangling his legs off the side. For a moment the room spun but he took a hold of himself and rose to his feet, his joints cracking as he did. Shirtless, Harry flicked open the lid of his trunk at the foot of the bed, disengaging the sealing charms with a thought, and pulled out an old white polo shirt.

“Hello, Harry,” Arthur Weasley said as Harry pulled the shirt down over his head. “You’ve grown since I last saw you.”

“Mr Weasley,” Harry nodded. “It is good to see you again. I’m sorry about the mess Voldemort and I caused this morning.”

Arthur half laughed. “You did what needed to be done, Harry – nothing more and nothing less. The Ministry thanks you for it. At times it seems it is only you fighting this war for us.”

Harry shrugged and raised his palms and his stomach grumbled. Three sets of eyes stood staring at him unblinking though, and he sighed again. Addressing Remus, who was seated near the window, Harry said:

“I know you’ve probably got a few questions... but they’ll have to wait – because I can’t anymore. It began today, again, and I know a war when I see it. Another moment can’t be wasted... suffer the cost maybe... one world that matters....” Harry trailed away, seemingly talking to himself at the end there. He blinked and seemed to remember he wasn’t alone... not anymore. “So no answers now, I’m afraid, because it would take a week – and I’m not even sure we have that....”

“What does that mean?” Arthur asked.

Harry grinned. “It means it’s time to roll the dice, Mr. Weasley.”

Ethan laughed and popped into existence next to Dumbledore. He was about half a head shorter than the old man, dressed in thick black robes

and possessing intense shining eyes. "How many times have the dice come up sixes for you, Harry?" he asked. "Not once, in all the years. It is the hard way or no way with you."

"Snake eyes will do," Harry said, answering Ethan without thinking. "I can work with snakes."

"Who are you talking to, Harry?" Dumbledore asked. Harry had been staring at something a few inches to his left. There was nobody there.

Harry blinked and for a moment seemed startled. "Myself, in a way," he smiled. "Yes, that'll do. Shall we go to lunch?"

Lunch it was, and five minutes later Harry was seated next to Ginny in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, Mrs Weasley already piling food onto a plate that had appeared out of nowhere in the first instant her eyes had landed on him.

Ginny was strangely silent as they lunched, but Harry learnt that everyone had seen him facing off with Voldemort, and at that his eyes widened. It didn't affect his plans... much... it complicated nothing, but it was huge. He didn't need anymore fame; in fact he needed the opposite – anonymity.

The *Prophet* was due in an hour or so, and Hermione was certain her parents would recognise him and send the Muggle newspapers as soon as possible. Harry nodded – he wouldn't be here for that... he had decided to leave, and soon... within the hour.

But there were plans that needed plotting, and he had to let his friends in on a few of them for clarity's sake. Things were going to get difficult, complex, and it meant he would be disappearing for awhile – a few days at least. Too much needed doing – and the time to do it in could be counted in days. Voldemort was up to something, of that Harry could be sure, and it had to be stopped.

Roll the dice, Ethan nodded. *You're taking a chance on rolling a seven*

on a six sided dice, you know.

I've had more impossible odds than that, Harry chuckled, attracting confused glances from his friends and the Order members in the kitchen.

"It was possibly the most amazing magic I've ever seen," Hermione was saying. "You scared us half to death, Harry Potter," she continued. "It was such a relief to find you and Ginny here."

Ginny suddenly took his hand in hers and smiled across the table at Hermione. "You should have seen it from my point of view," she exclaimed. "After... after a little incident in the shield, I think Harry set the sky on fire."

"I put it out," he protested, using an invisible thought of power to cut an apple into quarters. He was scarcely aware he was doing it until the first piece hovered into his hand. Crispy and green.

"That's what's important," Ron nodded wisely until Hermione elbowed him in the ribs.

The talk went on like this for a few more minutes as they finished their lunch. For a few minutes at least, for the first time in one hundred years, Harry was just a teenager talking with his friends about the mundane, and yet infinitely important points of life.

A tense atmosphere hung over the crowd in the kitchen though, and Harry caught the not so subtle glances the Order was casting towards him. Could hear whispered conversation, and noted that a few – Tonks, even – looked a little afraid.

Harry being Harry of course, did not give a damn. They would probably all fear him before the end – all who did not know the plan, and so be it. The world needed to wake up, in more ways than one.

"Let's head upstairs," Harry said as everyone finished their lunch. "I'm

feeling a bit dizzy and need to lie down.”

“Harry, dear,” Mrs Weasley said with concern. “I’ll fix you a restorative potion.”

“Thank you,” he said, hiding a sigh. He would not see her again for a long time after today, and he knew she would probably hate him for what he was about to do.

Ginny held his arm tightly as they walked up the stairs, probably because she believed he was dizzy. He wasn’t, but it had been a necessary lie. This way, the Order probably would leave them alone – knowing he was in the house and tired.

The four of them entered the bedroom and Harry immediately sealed the door and barricaded the room against eavesdropping. Walking over to his trunk, he shrunk it down and slipped it into his pocket as Ron and Hermione sat down on one bed, Ginny on the other.

Frowning, Harry noticed a parchment letter on the bedside table and when he broke the seal, Gringotts’ seal, memory came flooding back. These were the forms for selling his estates – sent by his advisor that morning, as promised – and he had to sign them and post them back.

I wonder where Hedwig got to, he thought absently. She had fled the mountain prison of the vampires at the same time he did. She should be very close by now. Harry picked up the quill on the table, pre-inked, and scrawled his scrappy signature at the bottom of the forms.

“Ron,” he said, “can you send Pig out with these today. I won’t have time....”

“What are you doing, Harry?” Ginny asked suddenly. She knew him so well.

Harry walked purposefully across the room and handed the property forms to Ron. “I’m leaving,” he said. “Today, now... in a few minutes. War

won't wait for me, and I won't let Muggles die just so I can have a few more days of peace."

"But..." Hermione began. "Where? Where would you go?"

Harry winked at her. "Better if you don't know, for now, as there are too many who would like to force it out of you, one way or another."

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "So... you're leaving, after what happened this morning. We... I just got you back, Harry!"

Harry turned to face Ginny and ended up sitting down on the deep mattress next to her, taking one of her hands from her lap and grasping it a little too tightly. "I'll see you in a day or two, probably less, Gin. I'll keep in touch – I'll have to. You," he said, and then turned to look at Ron and Hermione as well. "You three, are important in this fight in a way I don't even know yet, but you are."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"The dreams and bruises, Ron," Harry replied. "You felt them when I was a prisoner. We're connected, for some reason, and I think it means we have to stick together – four parts of a whole – so I'll never be far away."

"Why do you have to leave?" Hermione asked, but then frowned. "No, if you're going we're coming with you."

Harry shook his head. "I won't allow it. Where I'm going you can't follow, and I mean literally can't. It'd kill you."

"And where is that?" Ginny asked.

"Somewhere not so far away," he sighed and rubbed a hand through his dishevelled hair. "But I do have jobs for you, if you'll help," he continued. "Important jobs... and secret."

Hermione, Ron and Ginny exchanged dark almost unreadable looks.

They obviously weren't happy with Harry's sudden decision to leave, and Harry couldn't blame them. It had to be this way though, had to be. He had grown used to working alone, and would continue to do so for now.

Ginny sighed in resignation. "Dumbledore is not going to be happy with you," she said warningly. "Or us, once he finds out we helped you leave – and he will."

"I have a plan for that," Harry grinned, but his eyes looked sad for saying it. "You'll help me then?"

"Of course, Harry," Ginny replied, and her tone said he shouldn't have had to ask. Hermione and Ron said the same. "But what's the plan?"

Harry hesitated, letting go of Ginny's hand to look out of the window. Thanks to him the sun had risen today, if not a little late, but he swept his gaze towards the just visible London Bridge. Emergency services still swarmed over it, and what he could see of the Thames still looked frozen. How would the Muggles explain that?

"For now," he said in answer to Ginny's question. "For now it's to build up a... defence. I want to tell you more than that, but I can't. It simply isn't safe and I can take no chances."

"You can trust us, Harry," she stressed.

"And I do," he replied without hesitation. "Of all the people in all the worlds everywhere, you three I trust. You three and Hedwig," he finished with a wry smile. "But for now I can't tell you everything. After... after I've shown you what's in the pensieve, which will be a few weeks, I can tell you what we're going to do to win this war. But only after that, for good reason."

Hermione looked sad for a moment and then... excited, maybe, flushed. "You mentioned you had tasks for us, Harry? Something to do...."

Harry blinked and then remembered. "Right. Hermione, I want you to research something for me, in as much depth as you can. As far as I know no library in the world holds this knowledge, but I'll give you a letter of rights to withdraw funds from my Gringotts account to help in the search."

Hermione was, of course, eager. "What's the topic?"

"Prophecy," Harry whispered, his eyes gleamed, and a chill ran through the room.

Ginny squeezed his hand again. They all knew the prophecy between himself and Voldemort. One shall die; one shall live (perhaps). Harry intended to be the latter, although he supposed Voldemort did as well.

"Y-Your prophecy?" Hermione asked, shuddering. "I'm not sure what I can tell you about that, Harry."

"A prophecy," Harry replied. "About someone called the Darkslayer."

"Darkslayer?" Ron repeated with a frown.

Hermione nodded, confusion evident on her face. "I've never heard of that," she said. "But I'll do my best, Harry, I promise."

Harry smiled warmly and the chill seemed to leave the room. "I know you will." He turned to Ron. Ron – his best friend, one of the few he loved and one of the few capable of unlocking the true power inside of him. "Ron, I have a job for you as well – you too, Gin – but I can't let you know for a few days until I know more. It would be wise though, Ron, I think, to read up on military tactics. See if you can get some books on it from Diagon Alley."

"Well what do you wants us to do in the mean time?" Ginny asked, a little heatedly. She obviously didn't want him to go, but knew he had to, and was trying to hide her feelings about that.

“Make sure you go on that trip to Australia with Hermione,” he said, thinking and thinking and thinking. All too deeply, he was sure. Already he was juggling plans and straining as more balls were added.

“That’s not for another ten days,” Hermione said. “I thought you said you would be back in one or two.”

Harry nodded. “I will be, but only you three will know of it. And I won’t be staying long, just long enough to see how things are going. I have to do this, guys, or we lose. Just make sure you get to Australia with Hermione, you two.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell us why,” Ron said. “You haven’t told us much else.”

I don’t want you killed for it, he thought. “Patience, Ron,” he said. “I will explain more, when I know more.”

“Why can’t you just work with Dumbledore on this, Harry?” Hermione asked, after an awkward silence had stretched on for a few long moments. “He wants what’s best for you.”

“It might be a good idea to bring him in on this – whatever this is – you know,” Ron added. “He is Dumbledore, after all.”

“If anyone can help you do... what it is you have to do, it’d be him,” Hermione continued, cutting in before he could say anything.

Ginny, if she had an opinion on this matter, did not say anything. Her sad silence reflected in her deep brown eyes, upon her slightly angular face framed with thin strands of deep auburn hair said more than enough. She was resigned, but would do as he asked. God burn him for it but she would follow him anywhere if he let her, even into Hell... or worse.

“Dumbledore,” Harry said carefully, “would not help me with this. In fact I think he’d do everything he could to stop me, Hermione. I’m sorry, but you’ll just have to... trust me.”

"I do," Ginny said quickly as Hermione opened her mouth. "We do," she finished, shooting a glance at Ron and Hermione, who nodded as she did.

"Well... no matter what you hear about me over the next few weeks, just know that I'm doing what has to be done, okay?" They nodded, slowly but surely. "It is for the greater good – *will* be for the greater good – and all against Voldemort. But it won't be easy to accept, and if you hate me for it...."

"We could never hate you, Harry," Ginny sighed, and wrapped her arms around him, nestling her head into his shoulder.

"Never, you soft sod," Ron agreed, and Hermione nodded the same.

"Then it is time to get this show on the road," Harry said, biting back the tears he felt bubbling up into his eyes. He shouldn't cry – never show weakness – and at times was stunned to think there was enough emotion left in him to cry.

Is it a weakness? Ethan mumbled.

Harry couldn't answer that, so he didn't.

Heading towards the door now, arm draped around Ginny's shoulders, Ron and Hermione fell in behind him and, just as he touched the door handle, Hermione asked:

"Can't you just tell us something about what you're going to be doing?" she whispered in a strain. "I'm going to worry so much...."

Harry froze, and then forced a tough smile onto his face before turning around. He managed a chuckle and his smile turned slightly wry. "I'm gonna overthrow the wizarding world and unite all the governments under me, then I'm going to destroy every dark creature on this planet." He chuckled again at the end.

Ron snorted and Hermione *tsked* irritably. "Really, Harry," she whispered with a shake of her head. "That's not funny."

"It was," Ron giggled.

Ginny never said anything. She alone had felt Harry's arm tighten around her shoulders as he spoke, and was sure he wasn't aware it had. A spasm of... fear... apprehension... for him squirmed in her stomach as he spoke, and amazingly she found herself believing that Harry intended to do just what he said.

"Well if you're leaving," Ron said after the moment had passed, "how you going to get by Dumbledore? He'll be all over us if he thinks we know where you've gone."

Harry blinked. "Bugger, I'd almost forgotten about that. Thanks, Ron. Here's what we're going to do."

Harry told them what they were going to do, and although Ron, Hermione and Ginny did not like it, they saw clearly that it was perfect, if not going to be easy, and would require a bit of acting. Dumbledore had to believe it, after all.

"I don't like it," Ginny said when Harry finished. "I don't like it at all."

Harry, holding her hand, pulled her towards him and enveloped her in a hug, whispering softly into her ear. "I love you," he whispered, and only Ginny heard him. "I do – I always have. You brought me home; you saved it all, Gin. Remember that – but we do what we have to do. We have a responsibility to this world, because we're the only ones that can do anything about the evil that threatens it. I know you understand that."

Harry let her go, regretting it almost instantly, and turned to Ron and Hermione. He grasped Ron's hand and then pulled him forward into a quick hug, slapping him on the back. "Take care while I'm gone," he said, loud enough so they all heard. "And look into those battle tactics."

He turned to Hermione next, and embraced her a lot more softly than he had done Ron. "Make sure Ron doesn't trip over his own feet," he told her, and she laughed.

"Hey!" Ron exclaimed.

Letting her go, Harry nodded a final time to Ginny and then, with a sad wink, opened the door, unsealing it and dissipating his wards. "Game faces, people," he told them. "Make it real – I won't be too hard, Ron, but you'll feel it."

Dumbledore sat with Remus, Molly, Tonks, and a handful of other Order members around the meeting table in the kitchen discussing, who else, Harry. Arthur had just flooed back to the Ministry when they heard the commotion coming down the stairs.

"I'M LEAVING," an all too familiar voice bellowed, and Dumbledore knew it to be Harry. "I'VE HAD ENOUGH!"

Even though he was the oldest at the table by a good one hundred years, Dumbledore was up and out of his seat first and bolting to the corridor near the front stairs, a gaggle of Order members in tow.

So much had happened today, so much had changed, and now this... what had happened to Harry? He was becoming a danger.

In the hallway Dumbledore found Harry glaring – yes, glaring – at Ron, Hermione and Ginny. The awful thing was they were glaring back at him. The best of friends, and Dumbledore thought he could see real hate in their glares. Save Ginevra's. She looked sad.

"IF YOU'RE NOT WITH ME YOU'RE AGAINST ME," Harry roared, throwing up his arms. His eyes flashed, and power reverberated through the air in waves.

“YOU’RE BEING AN IDIOT, HARRY,” Ron replied, his face full of red blotches of anger. “WHY WON’T YOU TELL US WHAT—”

“WHY DO YOU KEEP ASKING?” Harry shouted right back.

“What is going on here?” Molly Weasley, storming in with her hand on her hips, exclaimed. Her face was flushed red with her own anger, and Dumbledore felt something amiss here.

“Harry said he’s leaving,” Hermione whispered, her voice shaky with unshed tears. She was grasping Ron’s hand tightly, Dumbledore noted. “We just... we just asked him what happened this morning and he starting shouting.”

“You didn’t have to shout, Harry,” Ginny said, and scowled at him half-heartedly.

“You won’t listen,” Harry stressed, stretching every syllable. “I don’t want to tell you, alright?”

“We’re your friends—” Ron began, taking a step forward. “SO YOU CAN BLOODY TELL US, YOU IDIOT!”

“RON!” Molly shouted and then cried out when Harry took a step forward and threw his fist into Ron’s jaw.

Dumbledore heard Ron’s jaw click shut painfully and drew his wand when the youngest Weasley son stumbled back into the table by the stairs, tears springing into his eyes.

“HARRY!” Ginny exclaimed. “There was no need—”

“I agree,” Dumbledore intervened, forcing all the power he could into his words. Lately it seemed that when Harry spoke, his words oozed raw power and enveloped the room. It was disconcerting, to say the least. He raised his wand and made to hold Harry in bonds of air, but suddenly

found himself unable to move.

Harry glared. "You and your Order, Dumbledore," he growled. "You do nothing but talk when action needs to be taken." Dumbledore grunted as Harry pushed him back against the wall without moving, without blinking, and held him there before turning away.

Ron was holding his split lip, Hermione was trying not to cry, and Ginny had paled considerably, looking a little unsure, Dumbledore thought. The rest of the Order seemed stunned, more than anything else, possibly because they knew they could do nothing to stop Harry doing whatever he wanted.

"Harry," Remus began, angrily, "calm down. You're better than this."

"I'm leaving," Harry said to Remus and Dumbledore would have flinched if he could have moved. Harry sounded so certain that at that moment Dumbledore knew he had lost him. "You lot do nothing but hinder me."

"Harry Potter," Molly, hands still on her hips and face completely red with the infamous Weasley anger now, began. "You will stop this right now and start behaving like a sensible young wizard or you can just go back to your room to cool down—"

"My mother's long dead, Mrs Weasley," Harry growled. "And thanks to him." He nodded towards Dumbledore. "I grew up without a parental figure in this life, so forgive me if I don't listen to you now."

The air seemed to cool as Harry spun on his heels to face Ginny, who blinked under his gaze and shied back slightly.

"It's over, Ginny," he said coldly. His voice made steel seem soft. "Whatever we had relationship wise is done. I can't be with someone who'll probably just end up getting killed anyway. And too much has changed for me to love you anymore. It's better for both of us this way... so... goodbye."

Molly Weasley gasped and all her anger faded away, tears stinging her eyes, Dumbledore could see. Harry was hurting more than himself this day... so much more. A few more Order members moved forward with their wands drawn, but Harry didn't even turn around before waving his hand, freezing them against the wall.

Ginny growled as Harry finished and then, Harry made no move to stop her, she slapped him full across the face. He didn't even blink. Ginny ran off up the stairs in a blur. Harry wasn't done.

"As for you two," Harry whispered, turning to face Ron and Hermione. Hermione was dabbing at Ron's split lip with a tissue, her bottom lip quivering. "I thought we were friends, I was obviously wrong. I'm doing you a favour though. This way you can stay out of the war. Trust me, it's better that way. Goodbye, Ron... Hermione. You can't possibly understand or follow me anymore."

And that was it... Harry turned a final time and Dumbledore saw the blue sparks behind his eyes as they connected with his own. The young wizard's fists were clenched and he seemed to be biting back on his anger.

"If you send anyone after me, Dumbledore," Harry spat. "Anyone! And I will not be gentle. Farewell, Professor, Remus. Remember what I said."

With a pop, Dumbledore watched Harry Apparate through wards that shouldn't let him, and as soon as he disappeared the bonds holding him against the wall faded and he slumped forward, unsure really what had just happened. He saw several people close to tears, but what was there to do?

Dumbledore knew, with a certainty, that if Harry did not want to be found he wouldn't be. It wasn't like him though. He had changed since March – changed a lot – but this wasn't like Harry. Dumbledore would have bet Hogwarts that nothing could have split his friends apart – nothing... and now.... It was awful.

I will not be gentle! Those words rung in his head, but Dumbledore had a few tricks up his sleeve, and caught himself when he realised he was already planning on getting Harry back. Was that wise, given his current temperament? Perhaps, given time, Harry would come back on his own... where else did he have to go?

No, Dumbledore knew he could not take that risk. Harry was the key to victory in this war, and no matter what he said he was not ready to fight on his own. He needed guidance; he was only sixteen, after all.

Dumbledore nodded to himself then upon reaching a decision within the first minute of Harry's disappearance. He would bring him back, using whatever means necessary.

Aware that the old man had put tracking wards over Grimmauld Place, Harry first Apparated a fair distance across Europe and over into the Carpathian Mountains, the first place he thought of.

He arrived on the ridge near the crater in the earth that used to be a mountain, a vile home of the dark creatures known as vampires, and saw that the ground was still smoking, so many days later. A vast body of steaming water had pooled in the centre of the crater, and eventually, given time and a lot more snow, this hole in the earth would become a great lake.

Harry could also see people a few miles away, on the crater's edge, and judging from their clothes, tents and equipment, he supposed they were Muggle scientists. This was another thing they wouldn't be able to explain. How does one vaporise a mountain?

Harry blinked and Apparated again, free of tracking wards this time, and the first thing he saw when he reappeared were crashing ocean waves on a long stretch of empty beach that stretched far to his left and ended abruptly in vast cliffs three or so miles away on his right.

Turning, Harry beheld a huge manor house built into the side of a sloping rock face that looked out over the glittering southern Indian Ocean on the bottom coast of South Australia. An isolated home, behind which stretched miles upon square miles of empty flat desert that eventually crossed the border of this southern state and completed the Nullarbor Plain. A large, extremely empty, lot of nothing.

The sand was smooth beneath his feet and the sun was low on the horizon, casting forever twilight upon this part of the world. In a few moments it would be gone, and Harry scowled angrily at the 'coincidence', if it could be called so. Why was it always twilight?

Harry walked off the sand onto a stone path that rose in a straight line towards the double oak black doors of the house that Sirius had left him over a hundred years ago, just last Christmas – whichever way he looked at it – and the only one that he hadn't sold off. Simply for the fact that it was huge, isolated, and had extreme... potential.

Outside the house was colossal, and probably invisible to Muggles. Clear shining windows caught the last rays on sunlight that day, reflecting off a hundred different panes of glass and making the house shine. The door was open, and creaked on its hinges when Harry pushed it forward.

Inside it quickly became apparent that this house was magically modified. It was extremely bigger on the inside than out. And it looked huge from the out. An amazingly long hall, long and wide, met his eyes and it was fully furnished if not a little dusty. At least two hundred metres long, a hundred rooms branched off it on either side.

A twirling marble staircase at the end of the hall rose up fifty metres to the next floor, and at periods along the hall dusty chandeliers flickered with flames as he looked at them. The house must sense the presence of its owner, he thought; because a coat stand on his right leaned down to accept his coat. He wasn't wearing a coat though, and it bent back with a sniff.

Not exactly knowing where to begin, Harry chose the first room on his left. It took him half a minute to reach it and inside was a library. A huge library. The one at Hogwarts paled against it. He'd have to bring Hermione here, though if he did he may not be able to get her back out.

A thin layer of dust and mould ran in this room as well. The air smelled and tasted stale, and as Harry pulled the door closed it creaked on its hinges.

This may take some time, he thought to himself, back in the main hall. *I wonder how many floors there are.*

Instead of Apparating this time, as Harry could see clearly where he was going, he took one step down the long corridor, blinked and thought a whisper, and was standing with his foot on the first step of the marble stairs, hand on the stone banister. He'd *jumped* from one end to the other.

Jumping was what he called it anyway, and it was one of the talents he had learnt at the Ways of Twilight. It worked along the same lines as Apparation, sort of, and there were no loud pops involved. It also took in aspects of bending reality and slipping into other layers of the canvas of the world. Difficult, hard to grasp and understand, but given time, Harry thought he could make it work for any normal magical person.

He climbed the stairs and lights from ornate gilded torches and chandeliers ran ahead of him, swirling up through the large open winding staircase, shining off crystal and dozens of moving portraits that stared at him warily. Members of the Black family back through the ages, he thought. They'd have to go.

The stairs must have risen for at least a mile, at least, and Harry felt the strain in his legs when he finally walked through a door at the top of the stairs and stood out on the roof of the house, only a few hundred feet above the earth, looking out into the night sky. He could hear the waves of the ocean crashing against the beach down below.

The house was huge, monumental. Perfect. Harry was certain it held ballrooms, bedrooms, more libraries, living rooms, probably quite a few bathrooms – hundreds – and kitchens. It was a house for entertaining guests, rich families from across the globe, and, Harry supposed, Death Eaters from time to time. From what he knew of Sirius' family, it would make sense.

And now.

Now it would be used for a different purpose. Now it would be used against Voldemort, and become his base of operations for his war. He needed an army though, an army bigger than this world had ever seen. Voldemort was planning something; his still burning scar was testament enough to that, and Harry would be prepared.

Gazing up at the stars, Harry's thoughts flickered over to Existence, and the war ravaging it. The War for Creation. He shoved his hands deeply into his pockets and sighed. That was not his problem; it wouldn't come to this world, and could sort itself out. Right now Voldemort was his problem, and the power surging through him.

You won't be able to fight him to the death on this world, Harry, Ethan whispered. He'll destroy it first. Where else would you go?

Harry just shook his head, he had no answer yet, and his thoughts turned to Ginny. Ron and Hermione as well, but mostly Ginny. What was her part in all of this?

Harry touched his cheek which was still a bit raw from her slap and sighed once again. He was sure they had done a good job convincing the Order that they were no longer friends, no longer together. It was hard, but it had been believable. Oh well, he'd see them again in a few days.

Deciding to explore the house some more, Harry Apparated back down to the ground floor to look around. He went into dusty, yet lavish, bedrooms. There were kitchens and stairs leading down presumably

into the basement, probably dungeons actually, and came again in time to the giant library.

Clicking his teeth, Harry nodded and entered it. There were a few things he needed to know that could probably be found in here. Least of all the location of the Ministry of Magic here in Australia. Other things as well – laws and regulations, knowledge on the International Confederation and powerful governments.

After all, he needed to know which laws he would be breaking and which governments he would be defying, to find out roughly what he was up against. Alone at the moment, but there were plans to change that as well, Harry sat down at the desk and began pulling books to him with thought magic.

It would take time, but he would find what he needed eventually.

Harry read long into the night, and before he went to sleep for a brief three hours, he spent one hour putting memory into the pensieve he had brought in his trunk, before shrinking it down again back into his pocket.

POTTER BATTLES DARK LORD **IN SKY OVER LONDON**

Special Correspondent Ian Lighterman

The rumours are true. The truth is known. Harry Potter has returned from the dead and has once again fought He Who Must Not Be Named and lived to speak of it.

Early this morning, as unnatural storm clouds blocked out the sky above most of the southern United Kingdom, odd lightning and torrential rain and ice pounded into our nation's capital. The Thames froze over and the

London Bridge became the latest battle ground for Harry Potter, as he fought the elements to stop You Know Who's in his latest bid for power.

Not much is known about this attack, save that Potter undoubtedly averted a national crisis, dispelling the storm and battering back the Dark Lord, but a glimmer of hope now burns softly in the hearts of millions, as their saviour, the Chosen One, Harry Potter, has returned.

Potter has been unavailable for comment and his current location is unknown, but those familiar with Potter's exploits know that he always seems to appear where he is most needed.

With the renewed threat of the Death Eaters, and the promise of further war on the horizon, our world called for its hero, and Potter responded admirably.

The Ministry denies knowing where Harry Potter is, and rumour has it that he may be amongst the company of the mysterious Order of the Phoenix.

Potter's story is well known— cont. p2

Harry stood hooded and cloaked in Diagon Alley, the morning after he had spent a few hours asleep in his home on the coast of Australia. His face was shrouded in shadow, but his cloak was white so as not to alert the Aurors overly much.

Around him the consumers in the Alley, and the shop owners as well, buzzed and he caught snatches of their conversations. The words on everyone's lips were Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

Glancing down at the *Prophet* in his hand, Harry tried to ignore the burning in his scar, and looked at the moving picture of himself hundreds of feet tall in the sky. The shot had been snapped from the roof of a

building a fair distance away, and as such it took in the London skyline as well as Voldemort.

Eyes shining, Harry watched his face contort in anger as he swung both of his swords at his enemy, and in the blink of an eye saw Voldemort create fiery blades of his own to counter the strike. *IT WILL END!* The sky shimmered a moment later and their images faded, blue sky rushing in to fill the gap in reality.

Flipping through the pages as Diagon Alley moved around him, Harry found what he was looking for. Near the middle, he found a small column announcing that the International Confederation was scheduled to meet tomorrow to discuss the fallout from what the Muggles had all seen around the world, after what had been viewed in the sky above London.

Representatives from every magical community on the planet would be there. Harry grinned.

This won't work, Ethan told him.

It probably won't, but I'll give them a chance to see the light, he replied.

Well then you better get prepared. You'll need more powerful clothes. No one is going to take you seriously if you go in wearing jeans and a shirt.

All in the plan, Ethan, all in the plan.

Tomorrow it was. Tomorrow it all began with an ultimatum thrown down in front of the world's power holders. Tomorrow Harry Potter would cease to be seen as a hero, as the saviour, of the wizarding world. He would be declared an enemy of many magical nations... and a price would be put on his capture.

But tomorrow was a day away, and there was still too much that had to be done before then. Harry folded the *Prophet* in half and shoved it up his sleeve, turning away back up the alley. Power whirled around him

and his aura shone like the sun, blinding to those who could read such things.

Whether they realised it or not the wizards and witches on the busy shopping street moved out his way as he walked between them, sensing unconsciously his awesome power. Harry noticed and it made him smile grimly with anticipation.

Tomorrow the Darkslayer would change the world.

[Chapter 10 – The Lord of Twilight, The Bringer of Chaos](#)

As nightfall does not come at once, neither does oppression. In both instances, there's a twilight where everything remains seemingly unchanged, and it is in such twilight that we must be aware of change in the air, however slight, lest we become unwitting victims of the darkness.

~~William O Douglas

Albus Dumbledore walked down a shining crystal hall that led to the stairs which, in turn, led up to his booth in the enormous rotund chamber that sat hundreds of members of the International Confederation. His footsteps echoed softly on the smooth marble floor, mirrored in the crystal walls, and his progress was watched by no less than two dozen security personnel.

Located on one of the empty islands near Fiji, hidden away from Muggle eyes and on land that no country truly laid claim to, the International Confederation was a towering monolith of shining white towers and

glass. Issues that affected the world were raised and decided here.

Walking through a pair of limestone doors that would open only for him, Dumbledore stepped into the Grand Chamber and two thousand faces turned to meet him, two thousand pairs of eyes looked at him with varying degrees of respect, hate, uncertainty, and loyalty.

This was the tenth time this month the International Confederation had met, seventy eighth this year. Not since World War II had the Confederation met so frequently, and never for more dire reason than this.

The very invisibility of their world was under threat, and it could be pinned solely on two individuals. Harry Potter and the Dark Lord Voldemort.

The room was set out much like the Muggle House of Commons in London. Each seat was occupied by a member, or an ambassador, of their countries Ministry. Many countries had more than one ambassador present; some had up to a dozen. But unlike the House of Commons, each group here were there for their own interests, and that of their Ministry. It was a meeting of ambassadors from every Magical Ministry on the planet, not just the separate political forces of one country. It was a place where the future was decided.

Dozens of members of the world's press lined rows and seats behind the politicians, the ambassadors, flashing cameras shone off the crystal and a line of light robed Aurors stood guard. There were dozens of Aurors, hundreds. Security had never been tighter at the International Confederation.

Voldemort was a threat, although one the world as a whole did not want to deal with, but they knew he was a threat, and the International Confederation had taken appropriate precautions. None of it was enough; none of it could be enough – not anymore. It would take more than a brave few – or one, as it seemed – to win this war.

Dumbledore was here now, standing next to Arthur Weasley in the booth for the British Ministry. A handful of advisors, including Percy Weasley, were there as well. The roof was open and looked out upon a twilight sky. To Dumbledore, it seemed oddly fitting. He had always felt twilight was, in some way, special, and tonight would be special.

“Do you have any idea what to expect?” Arthur asked, undaunted by the thousands of eyes now staring silently at them.

Dumbledore shook his head. “This is unprecedented, Arthur. The security of our world has never been so compromised. There may be panic, rash decisions... ignorance is born in fear and idleness, after all.”

Arthur nodded. “Have you... did you... Harry?”

“Not a word,” Dumbledore sighed. The meeting was just about to begin. A few representatives had yet to arrive, but the majority were here. “He has been gone two days, and no one has seen him – anywhere.”

“He may be held accountable, Dumbledore,” the Minister for Magic warned, shaking his head in regret. “This lot may blame him for that display over London. The Muggle world is in an uproar!”

Across the way Dumbledore met eyes with the American Sorcerer John Rafter. He was speaking into the ear of the American Minister for Magic, and it had been clear for years who held the real power between those two. Rafter pretty much ran the American government, and the small balding man sitting next to him was nothing more than a figurehead for the press. Rafter worked in the shadows.

He was the most outspoken member of the Confederation that was against declaring Voldemort a global threat. It was this man who controlled the largest magical government in the world, this man whose loyalty was to himself... it was this man that was allowing Voldemort to tighten his stranglehold on Britain, and Europe... and eventually the world.

Dumbledore and Rafter broke contact almost immediately, each wearing a dark frown. Dumbledore had no doubt that whatever he said today would be countered swiftly by the American sorcerer. It was... frustrating. Like a tug'o'war in which both sides wouldn't give an inch, and all the while the rope burned in their hands, set alight by Voldemort. Terribly frustrating.

The last few ambassadors and press, security and Confederation personnel were moving into the Grand Chamber, and with a loud clunk the large shining marble doors at the end of the chamber were pushed open. It used to be, back in Merlin's time, that the strongest wizard of the age used those doors to address the full International Confederation. It hadn't been used in hundreds of years, but it was kept open out of tradition, for one day a wizard or witch of Merlin's strength would come again.

Dumbledore's thoughts turned to Harry at that thought. The pedestal that Merlin had stood on for one hundred and twelve years was covered in dust from disuse, and it looked out upon both halves of the chamber equally. It was there that the strongest magical person in the world made themselves known. It was a seat of power, the Seat of Power. Nations at war had settled their disputes when Merlin spoke from there... it wouldn't have the same affect these days, but tradition held.

"The International Confederation meets," John Rafter bellowed once the Doors of Merlin were opened. The thousands of magical folk in the chamber fell immediately silent. "Our first order of business – this!"

Rafter waved his hand, and from the roof a shower of sparks fell – he was always one for flare – and formed an image floating in the air a few metres high. It was the picture of Harry and Voldemort in the sky, blown up a hundred times.

Dumbledore wanted to sigh, but he would not show weakness here. It was going to be a long, heavily protested meeting, and it had only just begun.

Hooded in a long flowing black cloak that shadowed his face so that only his green eyes glittered in the marvel of crystal, Harry Potter walked with a calm ease down the shining Hall of Merlin, which led to the Doors of Merlin, and the unclaimed power seat in the Grand Chamber of the International Confederation.

He wore steel capped leather-plastic Muggle boots that were thick and offered a lot of protection, and tucked into those boots, strapped to his legs with buckles and cords, Harry wore leather pants and a tight fitting black sleeveless shirt – underneath his cloak, that is.

In his right hand he carried a long black glass sceptre that rippled in the light, just an inch or two taller than he was, at the top of which rested a glowing diamond, roughly the size of his fist. It wasn't real, he had made it himself, but it would hold up to any test and, if he sold it, make him enough money in the Muggle world to live comfortably for the rest of his life. It was all for effect.

Behind him a long line of unconscious Aurors, men and women, lay on the crystal floors, and a mist was rising behind him, snaking through his legs and licking at his knees. It clawed up the walls and roiled around on the ground, thick and impenetrable.

The wards here had been pitifully weak – pitifully – and he'd Apparated straight through them all. There were those against unauthorised magical use, each wand had to be scanned before it could work here, but Harry hadn't used a wand for decades. Merlin himself rarely had, and his power paled compared to Harry's – a trickle beside an ocean.

This is gonna be so cool, Ethan offered, laughing insanely. Dumbledore's face is going to be priceless!

Harry grinned in the darkness of his cloak, his self generated mist spreading out ahead of him towards the massive open marble doors – the Doors of Merlin, he knew – and he could just glimpse the Grand

Chamber through them. He could hear voices up ahead, and saw one or two more Aurors.

They saw him as well, but Harry just kept on walking, a wave of invisible power surging from him, leaving a rift in the mist, knocking them unconscious. They would awake in an hour or two feeling a little disorientated, nothing more. That was something he had decided on, whilst forming the plan. He would do this, all of it, without killing a single person that stood against him. Save those who were Dark, of course – they would die.

Reaching the large towering doors, Harry saw the likeness of Merlin carved into the stone, his eyes two shining sapphires in the rock. They seemed to look down on Harry and frown, giving him an itch between his shoulders. He wasn't fearful though, the Darkslayer didn't fear the Light, or the Dark.

The large heavy marble doors were open before him, and no wizard or witch in their right mind since Merlin had ever stepped through them, had ever used this entrance to the Grand Chamber. Not even Dumbledore, and he was almost a rival for Merlin – almost. A trend that Harry had noticed, was that magic seemed to fluctuate through the centuries....

It had been enormous in humans at the time of the Founders, and then it died down a bit – still there but not as strong – and then Merlin was born in the fifteenth century, dying in the seventeenth. He had been powerful, and after him magic had deteriorated again, until Voldemort and Dumbledore....

And then there is you, Ethan said. Harry Potter, Battle Lord, The Boy Who Lived, The Darkslayer, Lord of Twilight, Salvation of Hope, Destroyer of Darkness... what else did they call you?

Harry chuckled as his mist began to seep through the doors and into the Grand Chamber. It was only the beginning of his special effects. *There were dozens of other names across the worlds we saved, and dozens more across those we doomed, Ethan.*

The Bringer of Chaos, the Dark Angel, Ender of Life, the Darkslayer – that was both a blessing and a curse.

Well I'll use the first lot today, I think – yes the first lot.

Ethan sighed. *Make your move, Harry, may the world not weep too long for it.*

Harry nodded and for a moment his calm emotionless face crumpled. What was he doing here? Him, Harry Potter? A boy of sixteen.... one hundred and seventeen... Merlin, what was he to do....?

Forcing those feelings back, Harry began to summon and weave illusions around himself. The mist was spreading fast now, seeping out into the Grand Chamber, and there were cries from within about it. He had to be fast.

In his library at his manor house on the coast of Australia, Harry had learnt a lot about the International Confederation, enough to know he would make the biggest impact coming through these doors. That was about it – the rest was barely planned, but would be magnificent! His illusions would see to that.

He had stayed up late last night planning it out, and the thought made him chuckle. *How to take over the world in less than twelve hours, abridged version...* It would be magnificent!

Before him, two men in shining white cloaks appeared. They weren't real, they were illusions, but each carried a banner on a long white flag pole with a sharp point to be driven into stone on the bottom. Today Harry would make his mark, and if they did not submit he would leave a reminder that he was out there. It would be terrifying!

The two men were identical, twins, and each wore a grizzled amount of stubble on his cheeks, intensive grey eyes and short brown hair. They were heavily muscled, and their voices would match their stature.

The banners they carried, Harry had devised last night. Merlin had been the last wizard to assume the Seat of Power in the International Confederation, the first and the last, and his banner had been a circle of stars surrounding a wand on a red background.

Harry's banners, and he had two, were... different, and would either inspire terror or fierce loyalty. He was not sure which would garner him more followers.

The first banner held by the Illusion Twin on his left, was – of course – a white rose. The White Rose, upon an azure purple background, twilight. The rose seemed to be crying, the drops of dew looking infinitely sad on its length. It wasn't dew though, it was blood. The rose bled upon the banner. It was fitting, really, Harry thought – he had filled an ocean with blood saving existence and the white rose.

It was fitting!

The second banner, held by the Twin on his right, was a different matter. Harry had spent half the night thinking of this one, and was unfortunately pleased with the results. If the first banner was forged in bright colours, then this one was its opposite.

Everything has an opposite.

Black as the night, two silver swords crossed each other in front of a hooded figure that Harry had met in person once, and had danced with times beyond count. Death. He drew swords against Death's neck, and threatened him to take him. The Darkslayer defeated Death, and his banner would reflect that.

Come and get me if you dare, Death, he whispered to himself.

Despite being inside, the two flags blew softly, rippled, clearly showing their symbols, as if in a light wind.

The mist was well and truly covering half of the circular floor in the Grand Chamber now, and Aurors were moving down towards the doors from the other end. As law, no one who was claiming the Seat of Power could move through the Doors of Merlin, but Harry was about to break that law.

He made the Illusion Twins start striding forward purposefully with their banners waving proudly, and then weaved more illusions out of magic. A magical beast, two in fact, that were considered the most dangerous on the planet.

Nundus.

Two illusions of Nundus.

Leopard like creatures that Harry had faced once before, one hundred years ago. Their breath was poison and one had claimed his left eye viciously. He had been unconscious in another world for two months after battling these beasts. It would be nothing now, of course, the work of the blink of an eye – but it would take hundreds of wizards to destroy one of these. If they were real....

Fear – he would use fear and intimidation.

Ahead of him now, the Illusion Twins, bearing his banners, had just entered the Chamber in knee deep fog, and a loud resounding gasp rose up from the thousands of people seated in there. A good three or even four thousand of the world's magical leaders, their aides and ambassadors, and members of the press. Press coverage would be vital.

The gasps died down to muttered whisperings, and it was then that Harry made his move, made himself known, and used the banner bearing Illusion Twins as announcers.

“BEHOLD!” they yelled in unison, their mouths moving as one – they were one. Harry was controlling them, thinking to them and weaving their voices so they boomed around the vast shocked chamber. “THE

DARKSLAYER COMES!"

Dumbledore, at least, would know who's coming, Harry thought. He had read the letter from Voldemort a few days ago, in which the Dark Lord named him Darkslayer.

Dead silence rang out in the Chamber, and Harry pressed the Twins onward.

"THE LORD OF TWILIGHT, THE SALVATION OF HOPE, THE DESTROTER OF DARKNESS, BATTLE LORD OF VERIOS, HE COMES!"

Verios had been the name of the world that they had honoured him as a battle lord, for saving them from a demon horde. Not the usual demons, something conjured out of dirt and stone. Still evil enough. He had earned these titles more than once.

"KNEEL BEFORE THE CHOSEN ONE, BEFORE THE KEEPER OF LIGHT AND THE BANE OF EVIL. KNEEL AND SUBMIT TO HARRY POTTER, THE BOY WHO LIVED!"

The last title echoed round the chamber ominously and every ear that heard it quivered. Harry waved his hand as he began to walk through the Doors of Merlin, and the Twins moved to either side of the pedestal upon which he would stand and claim the Seat of Power. As one, the Twins, without making a sound, thrust the sharp-pointed banners symmetrically into the sides of that pedestal, where they rung and rippled in the 'wind'.

Still knee deep in the mist, Harry had the Nundus prowl around him and growl, loosing a wisp or two of their deadly green breath. All for effect – one, how did he tame Nundus? Two, how did he survive their breath? Questions that would keep his opponents of balance.

As he entered the Grand Chamber, fire sprang from behind him and roiled in circles and spun up in spirals in the air, at times crossing his face an inch away, throwing back his hood and revealing his hard face to

the four thousand beyond shocked wizards and witches.

He swung his long glass sceptre through the air and cleared a path through the mist. The only sound in the chamber was his echoing footsteps from his hard Muggle boots. His banners rippled in sync with his footfalls.

The Nundus elicited screams from the weaker hearted people in the chamber, and gasps from others. Mostly he saw wariness and anger, fury and incredulity.

Unopposed, as he had expected to be, Harry walked silently up the few short steps to rise on to the pedestal. An ethereal glow from beneath surrounded him as he stood in the centre of the marble structure, placing his sceptre firmly in front of him.

"I," he began, and his voice boomed into every corner of the room, reached up high to the furthest booths dozens of rows back on either side and in front of him. Camera flashes from the rows of photographers were a constant blazing light. "Harry James Potter, claim the Seat of Power, within the International Confederation, from this day forth as my own. Let anyone who stands against me speak now, or keep their peace for time everlasting.

"As Paendro t'ithlin Merlin held it before me, so do I hold it now. This Confederation will hear and submit to me or feel the wrath of the Lord of Twilight."

The silence was deafening, and stretched on for long moments before anyone, out of four thousand leaders, found anything to say. Harry stood calmly in his resolve, sceptre floating before him, hands linked behind his back. He stood tall, proud, and met eyes with as many as he could arrogantly.

Still, despite all the glamour, the illusion, the booming voice and the Nundus, the banners and the way he held himself, his claims and titles, the majority of the International Confederation still saw a teenager of

sixteen years.

A tall man stood first, and then hundreds of others did. As the largest magical nation on the planet, America had first say on whether or not they supported his claim, so said IC law. It was the same tall man who spoke for America. He had a goatee beard and an arrogant swagger that Harry immediately took a dislike to.

“This is absurd,” he said, stretching every word and shrugging. “I don’t know how you got in here, boy, but the Aurors will soon find out. Arrest him!”

So, they weren’t even going to follow law and tradition for when a claimant stepped onto the Seat of Power. Harry sighed, he had expected as much. The plan was made in the expectation that they *wouldn’t* accept him, and so be it.

Following the tall American’s example, dozens of others began to shout for his removal. The chamber was designed so voices echoed, and hundreds of voices echoed very loudly. He picked Dumbledore out of the crowd, several rows up, standing silently surveying him. Contemplating, Harry would have thought, if he did not think Dumbledore would do anything to see him under lock and key in Grimmauld Place.

No sooner were the words out of the tall man’s mouth than a hundred Aurors, two hundred even, seemed to converge on Harry from all around the chamber. They came from down aisles; they left rows and appeared from security patrol routes on the outer rim of the structure.

Wands drawn, in less than a second four dozen stunning spells converged on the Seat of Power, and Harry did not blink. The red beams shot through the air and when they got within a four foot radius of him, the fizzled and melted away against a barrier that grew stronger on magic.

With a thought, Harry made the Nundus growl – made them roar – and his face went from serene calm to outrage in a heartbeat. He swung his

sceptre lengthwise across his body, spinning on the spot as mist spiralled around him, and plucked two hundred wands from two hundred hands. He had just disarmed every Auror in the Hall. The useless wands he piled in front of him beneath the pedestal.

Shock once again reined in the Grand Chamber.

“You have just witnessed the power of the Darkslayer,” Harry whispered, his voice made frost seem warm. “Do not anger me... I can destroy you all!” He wouldn’t, but they did not know that. Fear and intimidation. “I claim this Seat, what say you?”

The tall man had paled slightly when all eyes turned to him, and Dumbledore, but his arrogant swagger was still firmly in place. He scowled at Harry. “You exposed our world, you are still at school, and have had some luck in surviving in this British Dark War, Potter. You have no claim to the Seat of Power that I will acknowledge.”

“I second Sorcerer Rafter,” a dark skinned witch said, and from the crest in front of her booth he supposed she represented one of the African Ministries. There were a lot of them, and all of them followed suit.

Australia, New Zealand, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Russia, South America, Switzerland, Belgium, Indonesia, China, Japan, Nepal, Hungary... dozens more, following tradition now, voted against Harry’s claim on the Seat.

At last it came to Dumbledore and Arthur Weasley, seated high up in their booth, and Harry felt true anger coming from his once headmaster. The man was furious, beyond furious, so, of course, Harry smiled.

“A wonderful display you have put on for us today, Harry,” Dumbledore began. “I suppose I do not have to tell you how many laws and traditions you have shattered in the last half hour? No, I did not think so. The United Kingdom does not acknowledge the claim of Harry James Potter. He is not lawfully recognised to sit on the Seat.”

A lot of satisfied smiles and smirks came Harry's way at that, one or two concerned and fearful ones as well. No matter what they said, they had seen his power and were undoubtedly worried he was going to snap. Not today.

Surprising them all, Harry laughed. A deep, almost sardonic laugh that rattled up and out into the twilight sky. Scornful and mocking, Harry bit away his laugh with a growl and thrust his sceptre into the marble at his feet. A wave of power rippled out all around him and knocked every one of them in the Grand Chamber back into their seats.

"You're hanging yourselves," Harry said, his calm restored. "All of you are supposed to represent your nations, make decisions for the good of your nations, for the world! And you sit here and worry about what the Muggles will think of you, when Voldemort himself could destroy your precious Confederation with a wave of his hand."

Aurors watched him with narrowed eyes – disarmed Aurors yet still trained to recognise a threat – no one interrupted him as he continued, no one dared.

"You denied me today, and in so doing you drove another nail into your coffin!"

Harry threw up his arms and before him on the ground a vertical line of light appeared, spreading open to reveal the beach upon which his manor house was situated in Australia. It looked just like one of hundreds of beaches in the world, untraceable. He created a gateway from one place to another, and with a click of his fingers sent the Illusion Twins and the Nundus through it, before winking it closed.

"So be it," Harry carried on dangerously, his eyes sparkling. "You are unfit to protect this world, to protect even yourselves. If you will not give me the power I seek to end a war before it destroys this planet, then I will take it! All of you, be warned, for I am coming...."

Encasing himself in a stream of fire that was icy cold, and blue, Harry

lost sight of the International Confederation and, whilst in his fiery dome, Apparated away, leaving his sceptre and the two banners fused into the marble pedestal. Nothing and no one would be able to remove them.

A reminder that he was out there – that they weren't safe – that a change in twilight was on the horizon.

Having just challenged the entire world, Harry decided he was in need of something to eat, and reappeared thousands of miles away from the IC near Fiji, in London, one of the places he knew best.

Fools, he thought, stepping out of the empty alley he had Apparated into and onto a busy Muggle street in the centre of London. He could see Trafalgar Square from here, and Nelsons Column. *They'll all regret it in the end....*

I think you were very dramatic, Ethan offered as they walked down the street. They... he was never alone in his own mind, never. *Rattled some cages, to say the least. I won't be surprised if they order your arrest. You did break law.*

Harry ignored him and dipped into the first café he came across on that street. A fancy place with metal framed tables and chairs out the front, and parasols to provide shade from the sun. In his back pocket he carried a small leather wallet with some normal Muggle currency.

He attracted one or two looks of surprise, mainly because he was dressed as he was – cloak and boots – but he saw no threat from the Muggles in the shop, and approached the counter where a pretty blonde waitress smiled a bemused smile at him, and asked:

“Good afternoon, what can I getcha?”

“Can I get a cup of tea please,” Harry replied, feeling a bit odd. Not only had he just declared war on the world, sort of, but he was surprised by how quick he seemed to be fitting back into this world. “And I'll take a piece of that cake there, thanks.”

"Cake and tea," the girl repeated with another smile and humour in her voice. "You here with your grandma or something?"

Harry blinked. "Why do you ask?"

"Because tea and cake are what the old people always order!" she said, reaching into the glass display cabinet to remove a piece of the chocolate cake.

Harry grinned. "Well what should I have ordered?" he asked her.

"Coke and chips," she replied promptly.

"Next time then," Harry said, handing over a five pound note from his wallet. He received two pounds fifty change.

Picking up his plate and cup, Harry was about to turn away when the waitress spoke again. "You seem familiar," she said with a frown. "Have we met before?"

Harry shrugged. "Shouldn't think so," he said, thinking of himself in the sky over London only two days previously. A newspaper in a rack on his left showed his picture clearly, with Voldemort. Muggles were stunned, lost, of course. "Thanks."

Harry ate his cake outside in the sun, sitting at one of the tables, watching Muggle London stream by absently. There he was, the Darkslayer, doomed to die if he didn't put up one hell of a fight, and all that mattered at that moment was the cake, and thoughts of peace.

In peace prepare for war, Ethan mumbled and then in the blink of an eye sat in a chair opposite Harry. He was garbed much the same, but a wind that didn't exist blew through his feathered hair softly. "Are you going to go see her today?" he asked. "Or will you wait for her to read the paper and see what you've done...."

Harry sensed the eyes of the waitress who had served him on his back, and a few more from the people walking by and in the café. No matter, no threat, they probably found him interesting.

“Ginny knows what to believe,” Harry said after a moment. “As do Ron and Hermione... I’ll pop in, say hello, and then pop out again. After all, we’ve got to decide on our first target.”

“You think it will be easy to just take over a Ministry!? The Aurors will be against you, and any civilian with a wand.”

Harry shrugged. “I disarmed two hundred with a thought half an hour ago, I think I got this.”

Ethan sighed and flickered in and out of existence. “That Muggle girl is reaching for the newspaper,” he said quietly, and then vanished.

Draining his teacup, Harry mimicked his sigh and then disappeared, stepping into a different flow of reality, bending light and space around himself. He hadn’t moved an inch, but was invisible, completely not there. Someone could sit in this chair and would pass right through him.

Brenda, the blond Muggle waitress, watched the cloaked teenager at the table outside out of the corner of her eye. He did look dangerous, very dangerous, but she did not think he would make trouble. When he had been near, she had felt inexplicably safe, whilst at the same time felt a *brush* of extraordinary distance and... and... time. Time sounded right.

He sat eating his cake, and was looking through the chair opposite him. He was speaking, she saw, but to know one. Where did she know him from? He looked vaguely familiar, like someone you pass in the street everyday, or see on the train on your way to work... it was frustrating, on the tip of her tongue.

Absent mindedly wiping down the counter with her cloth, it suddenly hit

Brenda like a blow to the stomach where she knew him from, and the blood drained from her face. It was impossible, but then so was what had happened two days ago. With a sudden lurch, and a fearful glance out at the young man at the table, she looked away from him and reached for yesterday's newspaper in the rack to her right.

Flipping it open to the front page, she saw a shocking mess of black hair and a strong faced boy... man... with a weird scar on his forehead. It was him! She hadn't seen the scar when he ordered because his fringe had been obscuring it. Only five seconds after looking away from him, she glanced back over to his table and—

He was gone, leaving nothing but a few crumbs on his plate and an empty teacup. Brenda felt her legs go weak and she held onto the counter to steady herself. It had been him, she was sure of it.

She looked down to the newspaper, and to the emergency hotline number that had been set up for anyone with information relating to this... this *incident*. One hundred and twelve people had died, and this boy was caught up in it somehow. She reached for the phone, and dialled the number.

Not knowing who to expect or where, Harry Apparated whilst still in a thinner fold of reality, out of sight, and appeared in Grimmauld Place invisible at the top of the stairs on the second floor landing. The world, in this layer of reality, was tinged slightly red, as if the other colours that made up the world hadn't been *painted* on yet.

They haven't been painted on yet, not here, Ethan offered. *Hell of an Artist, though, to paint this, to paint it all.*

Paint it then abandon it, Harry growled in his mind. *This Creator is... not... Leave it be, Ethan! I'll not get dragged into other worlds and powers again, do you hear me!?*

It's not me you should be angry at, and you know it, Ethan responded, just as fiercely. You're many things, Potter, but you're not a fool! Are you frightened of what's out there, hmm? Whether you want it or not it is coming, and I'll be damned – we'll be damned – if I'm going to live in a head that can't stay strong anymore.

Harry shut him away with an angry wave of his hand. Sometimes the truth hurt, as did the fact that he had to be reminded of it. But he was the Darkslayer, damn it, the Lord of Twilight, for what it was worth, and he should be able to do anything. It hurt, knowing that he couldn't. And that was a foolish thought.

The landing at the top of the stairs was deserted, and looking over the banister Harry saw a few Order members walking about in the hall, obviously waiting for Dumbledore to return from the IC. Wouldn't he have a surprise for them....

Harry checked the room that had been his first for his friends, but found it empty. Ron's bed had been slept in though. Checking the girls' room, empty, he headed into the extensive Black library but it was also empty. With a thought, Harry *jumped* up the stairs to the third floor and entered the room where Buckbeak was kept.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny were lounging on the bed and in chairs near the open window, summer sun streaming in during these first early days of June. Buckbeak was, surprisingly, not there.

"...berra is the capital of Australia, Ron," Hermione was saying. *Canberra*. Harry walked over to them and, before stepping back into the first, true layer of reality; he listened and observed his friends for a moment. "The wizarding government there is located in a large skyscraper that reaches down many floors under the earth as well."

Harry knew all this, having read up on it the other night.

"Will we be going there?" Ron asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Shouldn't think so, Ron. My parents wouldn't be allowed in, to begin with, not without good reason. But we can visit the shopping plazas and whatnot. There'll be plenty to see."

"D'you reckon Harry will have time to come with us?" Ginny asked quietly. She was lying on her side on the bed in a blue blouse and jeans, scratching idly on a piece of parchment with a dry quill.

Hermione clicked her teeth irritably. "I don't know what to think about Harry anymore," she said. "He frightens me a bit these days."

Harry sighed and looked down at his palms. He was frightening, he knew, but to Hermione... she knew he'd never hurt her. He would die first.

"Harry has a war to lead," Ron said strongly, and Harry saw he was reading a book on Auror tactics and frowning in thought. Good, he would use Ron before the end, if he proved his worth *off* the chessboard, and his soul would be damned for it. Well... damned further, if that was possible. "He can't be too soft, you know. We don't have to fear him."

That's right, Harry agreed.

"Oh I know that," Hermione replied, straightening her skirts unconsciously. She was leaning against the window and half sitting on the open ledge. "But... its... it's his eyes mostly, you know. He sees everything! And they... they just—"

"Look dead sometimes," Ginny finished, staring ahead of herself at nothing. "At times they sparkle, a lot like Dumbledore's, but most of the time they're haunted and dark. That's what's frightening."

Ron thought about it for a moment and then shrugged. "He's still Harry, no matter what happened to him in those two months he was missing. He's still Harry."

"I think, to him, it felt longer than two months," Ginny sighed with a frown. "A lot longer...."

Harry stifled bitter laughter. *Ain't that the truth*, he thought. *It felt about a century longer than two months.*

Ruefully shaking his head, Harry bent reality with a thought, stepped *around* light, and appeared on the edge of the triangle his friends made – Ron in the chair, Hermione against the window, Ginny on the bed – and smiled what he hoped was a friendly smile, one of greeting.

As he appeared in an instant, Ron swore and jumped, Hermione was startled and grabbed her hands together, whilst Ginny uttered a short scream and leaped backwards on the bed.

“Bloody hell, Harry,” Ron growled as Harry laughed. “You scared me half to de—”

“Death?” Harry finished, tilting his head. “Do you ever wonder what would happen if you get scared half to death twice?”

“Very funny,” Ron groaned, sitting up in his chair and picking up his book from down its side.

Harry went and sat down on the bed next to Ginny. She sat up and moved close next to him, placing her hand on his arm, her fingers brushing the long scar that stretched along his left forearm.

“Where’ve you been these last two days?” she asked.

Harry shrugged. “Here and there,” he evaded. “You’ll see when the *Prophet* arrives tonight,” he finished with a somewhat anticipating grin.

“What have you done, Harry Potter?” Hermione asked strictly, her brow furrowing into a frown. “Nothing illegal, I hope.”

In response, Harry burst out laughing. “I... em... I may have broken one or two laws, Hermione,” he began carefully once he finished laughing. “And one or two traditions.”

"Such as?" Ron asked, raising an eyebrow.

Harry raised his palms towards the ceiling and looked down at them. They were calloused and blistered, red raw in places, but he no longer felt the constant pain from them. He had long grown accustomed to it.

"Merlin, Harry," Ginny exclaimed, seeing his palms, she caressed his skin softly with her silky smooth fingers. "What *have* you been doing? Here, let me heal it." She drew her wand and before he could protest, muttered a few mending and skin knitting charms.

The pale blue light issued forth in a steady flow from her wand and pooled in his palms. But it wasn't right, it faded away and the skin remained calloused, blistered, and raw. She tried again, as Harry sighed resignedly, to the same result.

"I don't—"

"Some wounds can't be healed, Gin," Harry told her gently. "There's a price to pay for using the power I use, and this doesn't even scrape the surface. Don't worry, it doesn't hurt." He placed his palms on his knees out of sight.

"You look tired," Hermione commented, as Ginny put her hand against his forehead.

"And you're hot!" she said. "You have a fever."

"No, it's the scar," he said, tilting his head forward. "Been burning constantly for a few days now. Don't worry, only bothers me if I think about it."

Ron's face flashed concern and he looked about to say something, but at the last minute changed his mind and said something else. "So, what can we expect in the *Prophet* then? Something like, *Boy Who Lived Dead Again?* Or how about, *Harry Potter Defeats Dark Lord at Blackpool*

Tower?"

Harry chuckled and then stared at the floor. "Try, *Harry Potter Threatens International Confederation*, or, *Harry Potter Wanted for Treason*, or maybe, *Boy Who Lived Finally Snaps and Declares War on Wizarding World*."

Ron gaped. "Y-You're not serious!?"

Harry smiled without mirth. "Wait for the paper," he said. "It'll say something along those lines."

"You didn't, Harry," Hermione said. "...did you?"

Anger flared in Harry's eyes, but it wasn't directed towards his friends. "I did, and I've got the power to back it up. The fools in the IC are sealing their own fates and I won't let them drag this world down with them. Not after all I fought through for it!" He continued, heedless of what he was saying. "We're going to need every Auror to fight against whatever Voldemort cooks up, and I have my suspicions, so if they don't give me command I'll take it."

"You are serious," Ginny said, sitting up straighter. "Merlin, Harry, you were serious when you said you were going to overthrow the...." She trailed away to nothing, staring wide eyed at him.

"And destroy every dark creature in the world," Ron finished.

Harry grinned coldly. "That, basically, is the whole plan," he said. "I intend to unite the world, not break it, and send every man and woman I can against Voldemort in the final battle."

Hermione shuddered. "Harry... this is either really insane or really... really *insane*! What do you think you're doing!?"

Harry shook his head. "This whole damn world is asleep, Hermione. I'm the only one awake enough to see and do what needs to be done. You'll

understand, before the end.”

“But people could die for this, Harry,” she stressed. “*Good* people.”

Harry frowned. “A lot of good people have already died,” he said. “You don’t need to tell me, of all people, that. And I don’t need to tell you what it means to be at war. It’s real, painfully so. We bleed, we die, / survive and so will the world.”

Silence stretched for a long awkward, reflective moment, before Harry sighed and stood up, squeezing Ginny’s hand reassuringly.

“Okay... how do I look?” he asked.

“Powerful,” Ginny muttered, staring at him. “And tired, Harry.” *Sad*, even. “What’re you going to do now?”

“Pay a visit to the Muggle Prime Minister, of this country, to reach... an agreement. There are millions of soldiers out there in the Muggle world... I won’t say more than that now. Just make sure you go to Australia with Hermione,” he finished. “If I don’t see you before then, I’ll see you then.”

He prepared to Apparate away, but Ginny stood up quickly and caught his arm. A moment later she briefly pushed her lips against his and he shuddered when she pulled away. “Be careful,” she said. “This is big, Harry, what you’ve done. Don’t... I don’t want to hear that you’ve died in mysterious circumstances. Take care, please, take care.”

“I’ll be alright,” he told her, brushing her cheek with his rough hands. “*You* take care... here; I should have given you this the day I left.”

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out two coins. Muggle coins. Two gold one pound coins, and clenched his fists around them. His palm shone and when he opened it the coins crackled faintly blue, little shots of power jumping across their length.

“If you ever need me, for anything, just squeeze this as hard as you can,”

he told her, pressing one of the coins into her palm. "This one," he pocketed the other coin, "will burn a hole in my pocket and I'll Apparate straight to you, using your coin as a... beacon. Keep it safe, Gin; don't let anyone outside of this room know you have it."

Hugging her quickly, and nodding to Ron and Hermione, Harry promised to see them again soon, and then disappeared without a sound.

The Muggle Prime Minister, of course, hung his hat at Number 10 Downing Street, that was well known. The best security systems in the world protected Number 10, the famous door, and there was also always a strong police and secret service force in the area, whether it was seen or not.

In the office of the Prime Minister, there were motion sensors and laser beams for whenever the man himself was not in the room, amongst other things, and when he was his life signs, heartbeat and pulse rate, were transmitted to a 'safe' box in the head of security's room down the hall. If it became too elevated, or dangerously low, alarms sounded and the cavalry rode in.

All of this technology and human presence however, didn't count for much when the wizarding world was concerned. The Prime Minister sat at his desk, scowling at the documents and information before him on the 'terrorist' attack the other day on the London Bridge.

He scowled from the documents and their 'official' results, and looked up to the empty portrait across the way, the one that announced a visit from the other Minister, the Minister for Magic. Unbelievable, even now, after three years of meetings between two different other Ministers. Fudge and then Weasley.

The Prime Minister also looked down at the newspaper, a day old, resting in his lap. It showed a boy, a young man, with twin swords above his head bringing them down upon a creature that even the makers of

horror movies would find hard to reproduce. The Prime Minister looked down at the Dark Lord Voldemort, and shivered.

This... monster... had killed one hundred and twelve of the citizens he represented, whom he was supposed to keep safe, and many more in the past. This monster was responsible for starting a war in that hidden wizarding world. A war that was spilling over into his world, that the majority of the population knew nothing about.

And then that man, that Arthur Weasley, had had the gall to tell him to calm down, to see reason, to stop acting like a fool! He had been told nothing, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom knew next to nothing about a war being fought on his own soil, in the very streets of London!

He slammed his fist against the table, and wondered what to do. No one would believe him if he went public with the wizarding world. Despite what had happened the other day, the claim was absurd – it would be the end of him. Easier to blame some terrorist organisation. No one would believe them if they denied it.

But that did not solve his problems.

One hundred and twelve funerals did not even begin to solve his problems. This world was dangerous, more so because of the powers they dealt in. *Magic, they called it.* Magic! Incredible, always there, out of sight, and used by roughly a million people worldwide.

Their war had started some years ago, the Prime Minister knew, and since then there had only been one or two isolated deaths of his normal people. But this was atrocious. They obviously could not control the Dark Lord, as they called him, and it might be time to take some action anyway, for the good of the nation.

The question was, what? The truth of the matter was no one knew about the existence of this world, no one! It wouldn't be easy to mobilise forces against a target buried somewhere in London, that much he knew, without proper reasoning or excuse.

But his countrymen were dying for a war they knew nothing about, and, by God, something had to be done!

Harry, standing in a fold of reality, bent the light around himself and refracted it off the shiny black door of Number 10 Downing Street. Inside, he knew, the Muggle Prime Minister went about his job, and from what he had heard Mr Weasley say about him, he was going about it with increasing anger.

Harry could understand that. The man had probably been told next to nothing, and was expected to sit on his hands whilst a secret war was fought in his backyard. Harry shook his head and walked straight through the door, because it didn't exist in the level of reality he stood in. Hadn't been painted in yet.

Moving quickly, *jumping*, Harry searched for the Prime Minister's office. He didn't know where to look exactly, but he knew what the man looked like. He followed the most heavily guarded areas towards a large oak door. Security cameras and guards were everywhere, but they couldn't see Harry.

Something he had always thought, after giving it a bit of thought years ago, was that the wizarding world had grown too used to isolating themselves from the Muggle world. There were billions of Muggles, literally billions, whereas the magical folk numbered scarcely one million.

Given the right application of magic and Muggle technology, the wizarding world would never be short of Auror recruits or even its own army again. Sure they wouldn't be able to do magic, but a weapon with preset spells and a charge of magic in it would be just as useful as a wand.

Jumping down a long corridor, Harry walked through a door in this red tinted world and saw a man scowling at his desk, hitting his fist against it

before glaring up at a portrait on the wall, which was empty of its occupant at the moment. Obviously magical, Harry could see a faint glow around it in this layer, the first brushes of power.

The Muggle Prime Minister of the United Kingdom wasn't happy, as Harry took a seat opposite the man's desk. There were a lot of empty coffee cups on his desk, a lot of scattered papers and Harry could see the newspaper with himself on the cover as well. There was a small slip of paper pinned to his forehead, obscuring most of Voldemort.

"Good day, Prime Minister," Harry said as he shifted reality with a thought and stopped bending the light around himself. Still dressed in his billowing black cloak and boots, leather pants and tight fitting black shirt, Harry knew he looked dangerous, despite his age.

The Prime Minister, to his credit, only flinched slightly back into his large leather chair, rocking backwards an inch or two. A brave man, a warrior, Harry thought. Good, they would be of like minds. Especially if the man had been left out of the loop by the Ministry of Magic.

"I saw you in the sky," the Prime Minister said calmly after he gathered himself. "Two days ago..." Another copy of the paper sat in his lap, and he threw it onto the desk. "You're the one who challenged this Voldemort, and five minutes ago I was told you were sighted in a café by Trafalgar Square."

Harry bowed his head and a small smile played around his lips. "Harry Potter, sir," he said, and reached across the table to offer his hand. Only hesitating for an instant, the Prime Minister shook it.

"Well... you're obviously one of them. Tell me, Mr. Potter, what can I do for you?"

Harry appraised the Prime Minister for a moment before he answered. He was a tall man, with greying hair that would have been chestnut brown in its day. He had sharp piercing grey eyes and a strong chin, which was covered in a rough growth of overnight stubble. Obviously no

press meetings today – the man looked tired and grumpy.

“One hundred and twelve people died Wednesday morning, two days ago. One hundred and twelve people were buried this morning, Friday, June 13th 1997. Are you a superstitious man, Prime Minister?”

The man shrugged but held himself tall and proud in his chair. “I wasn’t until I took office three years ago, young man. Then I learnt of your world, and I look at everything twice since.”

Harry inclined his head again. “Friday the 13th always has an ominous feel to it, especially in the wizarding world, sir. Sometimes magic can act strange on such days, that is where the legend of the 13th comes from. Not often and usually in ways we don’t even notice, but it’s unlucky for some.”

“You didn’t come to talk dates with me, Potter, what do you want? I warn you now, my patience with your kind is wearing thin. One hundred and twelve of my people have died because they could not defend themselves against your- your magic.”

Harry’s eyes flashed dangerously and the Prime Minister took notice. Whatever he thought, he knew the young man sitting opposite him was no boy. He kept his foot on the panic button beneath his desk. Should the worst happen, he pushed that button and two dozen armed men would burst through his door in seconds.

“Exactly why I am here, Prime Minister,” Harry said with a grim smile. “They did die, and our elected officials told you nothing. Our government shoved you aside because you can’t do magic. You have a country to run, but there is a hidden world within it. I know a lot about worlds upon worlds hidden in worlds, sir, and I know you’re probably very angry with mine right now.”

The Prime Minister nodded. Hard as a lion, this one, and perhaps enough strength – not in magic, but of the soul – to see and do what needs to be done. “I’m very close to considering your world, Mr Potter,

an enemy of the United Kingdom. War is an option I am considering. Tell me, do you think it could be called civil war?"

Harry's small grin faded away and dead calm replaced it. "There is a war coming," he whispered and the room seemed to hold its breath, grow darker. "A Dark War, the Last War... one that will see this world in ruin before the end."

"Voldemort," the man said the name sharp and clear.

Harry nodded. "The last thing I need, you need, is a war against the wizarding world." He removed the one pound coin that connected him to Ginny from his pocket and began to roll it expertly up and down the back of his knuckles, all the while staring without blinking into the Prime Minister's eyes.

"You've come to me with a choice, haven't you?" the man asked.

"The War is coming," Harry began, the coin a blur on the back of his knuckles, "and it will rain blood, that I guarantee you. It is simply unavoidable. The fools in my world let Voldemort grow too powerful sixteen years ago, and now he is damn near immortal—"

"What is your place in all of this?" the Prime Minister cut in, gesturing towards the newspaper.

Harry grinned, it looked insane, maddening, and showed a lot of his teeth. "I'm the saviour of the world," he said simply. "I'm the man who will soon rule the wizarding world. I'm Harry Potter, the most powerful wizard on this planet. I'm all that stands between Voldemort and wiping those he deems unworthy off the face of the earth."

"Unworthy..." the man repeated. He had been told a lot about Voldemort by the last other Minister, Fudge. "Us, Muggles, as you call us."

Harry nodded. "Your numbers are far superior to ours. You outnumber us a thousand times over. What I want, today, Prime Minister, is an

agreement between ourselves that you'll commit forces to the take over of the wizarding world, to aid me, and in time face the Dark Lord Voldemort in the last war of this world."

For a long moment, Harry thought he had finally unnerved the man. His jaw hung open, gaping, before he snapped it closed quickly and regained his regal, proud manner. "Say that again...." he whispered.

Harry sighed and looked down to the coin blazing up and down his knuckles. "Heads or tails?" he asked the leader of the United Kingdom. The man opened his mouth, looked at Harry and then down at the coin, before waving his hand. "Heads," he muttered.

Harry flicked the coin up into the air where it blurred into a flipping circle before coming down in an arc over the oak desk. It landed with a *thunk* on the desk and, for a long moment, spun on its side, spinning faster and faster before abruptly stopping – poised on its edge, neither heads nor tails.

"The entire world rests on the edge of that coin, Prime Minister, both of our worlds – this whole planet! It can tip either way. You and I, we picked heads, Voldemort picked tails. Which way will it fall, I wonder?" The coin wavered, dipping left and right but never falling. Harry opened his hand and the pound coin flew into it.

"Despite what you've told me," the man said harshly, scowling. "I see before me a boy who should be in school. I don't pretend to understand your world in the least, but you wish me to believe that *you* are going to take it over, and you want my forces to help you!?"

"Essentially," Harry agreed. "I want to do something that hasn't been done before, in any world I know of; I want to mix the Magic world with the Muggle world. I want to blend our technologies; I want us to fight side by side against a common enemy. I want us to work together to send Voldemort back to Hell!"

"You don't want much," the Prime Minister commented wryly, twitching

an eyebrow. "You're a very confident young man."

Harry chuckled. "I was once told that confidence is courage at ease by a man who died with his guns blazing. Went down swinging, as the saying goes... I do what has to be done, Mr Prime Minister, because no one else can...."

"And will the world pay hell for it, I wonder?" the Prime Minister mused.

"Undoubtedly," Harry replied. "There will be death, before the end. Death and blood and fire and pain. But there will be *less* of that if we work together. Think carefully on that, Prime Minister, it may be the most important decision anyone in this world has ever made...."

For the first real time since this young man had arrived in his office, the Prime Minister felt a sudden longing sense of immense, titanic distance. For a brief moment, he saw a road walked thousands of miles, and around Harry Potter a blazing inferno suddenly shone and then died.

His eyes widening, the Prime Minister dropped his gaze to the desk in front of Potter, unable to meet his eyes. He felt... safe... yes, safe was the word, around this boy. Nothing in the way he held himself told the Prime Minister that he was dangerous, deadly, and yet he was sure he would be dead in the blink of an eye if Potter wanted it so.

That wouldn't effect his decision here, not in the least.

For three years really, ever since he had learnt of the hidden magical world, he had been looking to get a foothold in what goes on there, and this boy, who claimed he would soon rule that world, was willing to give more than just a foothold. He was willing to mix both worlds, perhaps even reveal its existence. Harry Potter was his proof, and he was offering just that.

Still... this magic was incredible. They had all seen the display over London. How did he know that any forces he did commit were not just going to be slaughtered by spells and enchantments? The very Thames

had been frozen by Voldemort; he had killed hundreds with his magic.

This was a decision he really wasn't fit to make, not without knowing more, but Potter wanted it now... and it may not come again.

"Just tell me one thing, Harry Potter," the Prime Minister said finally. "Do you honestly believe that you can defeat Voldemort, that you *can* end this war?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't.... I wouldn't have just claimed the wizarding world as my own if I didn't. I wouldn't be *alive* today, if I didn't."

As one, the two men shook hands, and the world was changed again by choice. Where it would lead was not clear, as there were many more choices to make, but it would take the Lord of Twilight one step closer to the end of his great game.

So long had he played it that he no longer knew anything else, but he remembered that the playing pieces did have souls – well, every other piece save himself and Voldemort had a soul. His was bereft and torn, lying in tattered ruins against a tombstone in a graveyard of damned hopes and last breaths of defiance.

The Soul of the Last Hero was damned – doomed to suffer an eternity in Hell for his crimes. If that wasn't irony then such a thing did not exist.

Suddenly laughing at the thought, Harry didn't feel the Prime Minister snatch his hand back or see him gaze with a growing amount of fear into his insanity riddled eyes. Eyes that sometimes held a dead soul behind them.

So be it, Harry thought through his laughter. *Satan probably wouldn't have me anyway – too afraid I'd take over.*

One choice today.

Another tomorrow.

Harry had started something that very soon he would be unable to stop, and the world *would* pay hell for it. *Bringer of Chaos*, they had called him – and he would do just that.

Chapter 11 – Between Harry and God

*We may lose and we may win,
but we will never be here again.*

~~Jackson Browne

The Daily Prophet

HARRY POTTER – HERO OR MADMAN?

Special Correspondent Rita Skeeter

As wizarding Britain felt a renewed hope with the return of their supposed saviour, was Harry Potter secretly planning to betray us all and align himself on an equal footing with He Who Must Not Be Named, and attempt to overthrow our world?

The answer, sadly, is yes.

Late last night a hooded figure, shrouded in mist and bearing unknown banners, leading two Nundus

by the collar, broke into the International Confederation and walked through the Doors of Merlin, rendering seventy two Aurors unconscious to do so, and disarming a further two hundred.

The figure proclaimed himself as Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, and indeed, given what we know of Potter's power and past flouting of our laws and traditions, it was him. (centre image)

Amongst other things, the self proclaimed Lord of Twilight demanded he be given Merlin's Seat of Power, which has not been claimed since the great wizard's death several centuries ago. They who hold the Seat have the power of the world at their fingertips, so it is said, and Potter did seem to have just that – without the Seat.

No one can doubt the good Harry Potter has done for our world since the first time he defeated You Know Who shortly after his first birthday. He has faced Dementors, Basilisks, Death Eaters, and not to mention his parents' murderer more times than any other person in the world, and lived to tell the tale. But has the strain become too much on the boy-wizard?

Surely no one can fight darkness for so long without themselves feeling the bite of the evil in our world. Potter has been known to use dark magic, has experienced many traumatic events in his short life, and maybe now, after so long, he has lost sight of what is right, and erred down the path He Who Must Not Be Named took so many years ago.

St Mungo's experts discuss Potter's mental health on page 2.

The Wizzarding Times

POTTER DOING WHAT HAS TO BE DONE?

Special Correspondent Ian Lighterman

It is not often in our lifetimes that we witness the beginning of something truly great, truly amazing, truly beyond us. Yesterday evening, as the International Confederation met on matters of war, Harry Potter rattled the cages of the politicians and power holders of this world.

Claiming the Seat of Power in the International Confederation, Potter set about to display his true strength by disarming two hundred highly trained Aurors with the blink of an eye. He was denied the Seat by a unanimous IC vote, but looked as though he had expected such a vote, and did not leave quietly.

Fusing his personal banners and sceptre into the Seat, showing the world he claimed it, Potter then announced without any hesitation that he would be removing the members of the IC from their positions of Power, and disappeared in a blaze of fiery blue light.

Where Potter went is unknown, and given his history it is unlikely we will ever know, but the world's leaders are taking his threat seriously and have set about increasing their personal protection, as well as the magical barriers on their establishments.

Though if the IC itself cannot keep Potter out then these efforts may be deemed as futile.

As of this moment, even Albus Dumbledore has been unable to remove Potter's mark on the Seat, and a reward has been offered for information leading to the young wizard's whereabouts.

One hundred thousand galleons – the highest reward for a 'criminal' who has so far gone out of his way to keep people alive, and has sacrificed a lot to save our world more than once.

This begs the question that will be on everyone's mind soon or late: Is Potter doing what has to be done for the future of this world?

The power of He Who Must Not Be Named has unquestionably skyrocketed since his last appearance in March – enough so that he could conjure the storm demon, a being of mythical power and malice.

Does the IC's refusal to recognise You Know Who as a global threat mean our leaders are dooming us to certain defeat? Or is Potter insane? The same Potter who has, more than once, fought back the worst evil in our world.

Is the Boy Who Lived our last hope? Will he save the world or tear it apart? With two wizards, Potter and the Dark Lord, siding off against one another and both claiming the world as their own, will we all be crushed when these titans duel?

The Daily Prophet

SEARCH FOR POTTER ENTERS FIFTH DAY!

Five days and once again thousands of galleons spent on locating the infamous Harry Potter, and the young wizard has not been sighted anywhere on the planet.

We are all familiar with his disappearance during March, April and May, and the futility of the resources wasted trying to find him then. Is it wise to continue spending galleons that could go to the war effort, on a boy that clearly does not want to be found?

The International Community is in an uproar over the audacity of the Boy Who Lived, and many are considering time in Azkaban for his flouting of the IC law. Our Ministry is being called into question on the motives of the boy, and whether or not he is a figurehead for a United Kingdom plot to overthrow the IC and take the resources they 'claim' we want to end our war.

(cont p2)

2

Days

Later

June 20th, 1997

Hermione didn't have to try very hard to convince her parents that travelling by Portkey to Australia would be a lot easier, cheaper, and faster than booking a flight on an aeroplane – especially because Ron and Ginny were accompanying them, and it would be a lot of hassle to get them on a Muggle plane.

Thankfully, the tickets Brian Granger had booked were fully refundable, and he did just that two mornings before Hermione arrived home bringing two of her friends. She had said there would be three, and Mr Granger knew who the third missing was. Harry Potter, somewhat of a celebrity in the magical world. Hermione had said he was meeting them in Australia.

Dressed for warmer weather, but still a bit cold for Australia, the two Weasleys and the three Grangers huddled around an old boot that Friday morning, each carrying a suitcase that Hermione had charmed to be feather light.

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny had spent two days at Hermione's home in Abingdon, a lot of the time spent getting to know her parents better, a fair portion of the time devoted to looking out for Harry....

After the constant stream of newspaper articles about him proclaiming him as a hero, a madman, an idiot, a dark wizard, and a number of other things,

Hermione was in an almost round the clock state of worry about him. She told herself that he could protect himself better than most, but it wasn't enough. Not when both Light and Dark wizards all around the world were hunting him.

She told herself it would make headline news if he were seen or captured, and that no news was good news, but she worried – so did Ron, and Ginny was pale with worry. So far she had refrained from squeezing the coin Harry had given her, he had said it was for an emergency, but Hermione saw her rolling it around from time to time, and biting her bottom lip.

“When is this thing supposed to work, Hermione?” Janet Granger asked, holding the old boot by a shoelace.

Hermione fell out of her thoughts and looked at her watch. “Thirty four seconds,” she whispered.

It was an international Portkey, but Professor Dumbledore had been only too happy to provide it. A little too happy, Hermione would have thought, but it did not matter. If he hoped they'd lead him to Harry he was wrong. They did not know where Harry was, and there had been no sign of him at all.

The Portkey was set to transport them to Canberra, the Australian capital. Into the ground floor of the Australian Ministry, where someone appearing through Portkey would not appear as odd. From there, it was the simple matter of taking a taxi to their hotel for the few days they intended to spend in the Australian capital.

Lost in her thoughts, Hermione gasped when she felt the familiar tensing behind her navel and was pulled into the Portkey, magic spinning her around faster and faster, a blur of colours, a roaring wind and a feel of falling. Slightly dizzy, Hermione, her parents, Ron and Ginny stood in the foyer of the Australian Ministry of Magic.

"Are- are we here?" Brian Granger asked. "Did we...."

"All the way from England," Hermione said, having her first look around the Ministry. It was a lot more modern than the one she knew best back home. A lot newer looking, with smooth carpeted floors and ultra-modern steel furniture, glass windows looking out into a busy street.

"Incredible," Mrs Granger said, shaking her head and smiling slightly. "That really is incredible."

In contrast to the modern foyer, every person in the large room was wearing wizarding robes and looked simply magical. A tall man with a strong brown beard approached them, holding a scroll of parchment. "Granger party?" he asked.

"Brian Granger," Mr Granger said and offered his hand. The bearded man took it.

“Welcome to Australia,” he then said. “The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant stay – please take these documents and Muggle paraphernalia.

They allow you to legally be in this country for three months, or until your visa expires on the Muggle papers.”

He handed Mr Granger a thick brown envelope and bade them a pleasant day, showing them to the revolving glass doors, telling them that since they were Muggles a taxi service operated most days just around the corner and could take them on to where they were staying.

There were seven Aurors on the door, and one of them held a picture of Harry. Hermione and her father were the only ones who saw it.

Outside it was mid-afternoon, as oppose to the morning they had just left in England – the air was warm and humid.

“Canberra,” Ginny said. “It seems nice.”

The skies were cloudy but a fair amount of sunlight shone through a large gap in the west, and the sights and sounds of the city washed over the small party as they made their way around to the taxi bays. They would need a maxi-taxi, a people mover, something that sat about six.

Still dragging their feather-light suitcases, Mr and Mrs Granger took the lead until they came to a turn off into the road that led to a small car park that was packed with cars and a taxi bay about seventy feet away. As they approached, a man jumped out of one of the bigger taxis, the one they needed and approached.

“Welcome to Australia,” he said with a wink. “I’m from the Ministry – they keep me round for groups like you. I’m a Muggle, let’s get your suitcases in the trunk and see you on your way.”

This man had a small growth of stubble covering his face and blue eyes. A mop of brown hair covered his forehead and ears, feathered down to

his neck and when he walked he did so with a slight limp to his left. The purple taxi was large enough, and a few minutes later the suitcases were loaded into the back of the car. The limping man got the side door for Ginny, and then jumped into the driver's seat.

"The Hyatt Hotel, please," Mr Granger said, sitting in the passenger seat opposite the limping man. "And can we take the scenic way?"

The limping man winked again, and Hermione thought she knew him for a moment. "Scenic it is – take you round the Parliamentary Triangle and we'll go from there." His speech was slurred, not quite Australian, and a small smile played around his lips.

The taxi pulled away from the bays and out into the street. It was an automatic car, Hermione saw, and thought it was about time she herself learnt to drive. It was all good and well being able to travel with magic, but she also lived in a world where most people couldn't – including her family – so that was something to do after this holiday and before she went back to Hogwarts.

"Can't say I've been working here long," the limping man said in response to something her father had said. He indicated and turned into a filter lane, having to stop for a red light. The Ministry building was on the left, outside of her window, and Hermione hoped Harry had stayed well away from it.

"No... jack of all trades me – just doing this job now, probably be another one later."

There was something familiar about the driver, Hermione was certain, and she saw Ginny frowning at him as well, spinning Harry's coin in her palm.

Ron, being Ron, was mostly oblivious, and was staring out at the Muggle world and shaking his head at electronic billboards and road signs and whatnot.

"I've seen most of Canberra, yes," the driver said. "I can recommend the restaurant just a few buildings down from the Hyatt actually. Food is

great, so is the drink. You planning on staying here long?”

“A month,” Mrs Granger said, leaning forward in her seat behind her husband. “We’re going to Sydney in four days, then up to the Gold Coast, before flying over to South Australia, and then Western Australia.”

The limping man nodded. “I’ve seen a bit of Western Australia,” he said.

Hermione’s mind was racing. She did not know the face of the driver, but her thoughts turned to Harry and the war he was caught up in. She knew that she was a target, that they all were, her parents included. Voldemort had tried to kill her mum and dad once, and would most likely do so again if Harry didn’t stop him.

Was this driver a Death Eater? How could she be certain they were heading to the hotel? She did not know the city of Canberra, none of them did. He could be taking them anywhere.

“How far is it to the hotel?” she asked, clenching her wrist and the wand holster she possessed under her blouse sleeve arm. Her wand twitched but didn’t fly into her hand – not until she was sure.

The driver looked at her in the rear-view mirror and winked yet again. A character trait maybe... “Ah well,” he said, and looked behind her in the mirror out the back of the car. “I’m afraid I won’t be taking you to the hotel.”

In an instant Ron, Hermione and Ginny had their wands out and trained on the back of the man’s head. “Stop the car now,” Hermione said, straight to the point. “Ginny, press that coin – get Harry here.” Harry could handle a dozen Death Eaters, she knew, or more.

Ginny didn’t hesitate and pushed the coin hard into her palm. It rippled and crackled blue and then shone with a deep white radiance. The limping man didn’t stop the car, but turned down a one way road that was empty – devoid of traffic. Then he brought it to a slow stop.

Mr and Mrs Granger were not sure what to do, but Brian clenched his fists and ordered he stop the car. A stunning spell was on Hermione's lips when the limping man rippled, much like the coin, and he... changed. His brown hair became black, his blue eyes dazzling emerald and his short growth of stubble receded to just a faint shadow.

"Hello, guys," Harry said. "Can you push that coin again, Ginny, please, the other one is burning a hole through my pocket."

"Harry!" Ron exclaimed.

"HARRY!" Hermione screeched.

"Harry," Ginny smiled and clenched the coin until it stopped glowing. "I had a feeling...."

Harry smiled. He looked tired, he felt tired, and he sounded tired. "Sorry for the deception," he said, leaning back over his seat to look at them all. "But I'm sorta on the Ministry's Most Wanted List, and they've got people watching the hotel in the room next to yours, so I had to get you away now. Mr Granger, Mrs Granger – it is good to see you again."

Frowning and glancing out of the back window, Harry turned around and started the car moving again down the one way street. He spoke as he drove. "So, we can't go to the hotel, I'm afraid, because Voldemort will know that the Ministry is watching it, and therefore he'll know where to find you."

Mrs Granger visibly paled at the mention of the Dark Lord's feared name, the blood draining from her face. Hermione knew her mother had seen Voldemort once, in the ruins of their house last Christmas. Hermione had met him for the first time a few months later, and he was terrifying. Brian Granger hadn't seen him though. "Hang on a minute, Mr Potter," he said. "We've planned this holiday for weeks and I don't think it—"

“Forgive me, sir,” Harry cut in, turning back onto a main road. “But you don’t know what to think – let me do it – and it’ll keep you and your family alive.”

“Staying away from you would also do that,” Mr Granger replied.

“Dad!” Hermione gasped.

“I’m afraid it has gone beyond that now,” Harry said. “But we’ve got somewhere... better... to stay. Safer as well. With a private beach and easy access to any point in the country. You’ll get to see a lot more of Australia this way, you’ll have no fear of death, and... and it will just be a weight off all of our minds.”

To Ginny, Harry did seem tired – he had looked tired the last time she had seen him a week ago, and had, if anything, slept less since then. His eyes seemed alive though, sparkling and dangerous, looking everywhere at once. She suspected that there wasn’t anything he didn’t see around him.

“Where have you been, Harry?” she asked. “You said you were going to go see the Muggle Prime Minister—”

“I did,” Harry nodded. “And that went... well... I suppose, but let’s talk about something else. I mean, you are here on holiday.”

“Where is this place you’re taking us?” Mr Granger asked roughly.

“Somewhere,” Harry replied, “on the coast of Southern Australia.”

Janet Granger sighed and folded her hands calmly into her lap. “If you... if you think this is best, Harry, we won’t argue. But we don’t know much about your war, but we did learn to trust you over Christmas, so....”

If anything, Harry looked like he was trying to remember what had happened at Christmas. How could he forget!? Voldemort had killed Ethan Rafe, he’d captured twenty Death Eaters, the prophecy had been

revealed to the Dark Lord, and he'd ended up in a Muggle hospital. Ginny feared for him, and what he would eventually show them in the pensieve.

"Trust," Harry said. "From now on I don't want any of you to trust anyone you meet outside of this car. There are a lot of... *people*... out there, who would do a lot to get their hands on me. I'll explain the rest later, but now...." Harry turned off the street and into an empty alley between two buildings.

Driving along, Harry waved his hand and ahead of them the air seemed to *open* and a beam of white light spread out, revealing a large impressive hall where the back of the alley should have been. It cut right across the alley, and Harry drove right through it. Mr and Mrs Granger paled as Hermione turned in her seat to look out the back window and watch the gateway close.

An impressive piece of magic – she hoped she could learn it... that Harry would teach it.

Harry turned off the car and took off his seatbelt before stepping out onto the long red carpet that cut up from the front doors to the large marble staircase of his headquarters. The chandeliers along the ceiling, dangling from domes and on the walls all flickered with pale white light, and a line of candles hung suspended on air curling up the stairs. He'd parked the taxi in the dead centre of the large entrance hall.

The Grangers, and the two Weasleys, got out as well – looking around at the large hall and the dozens of doors along the walls.

"I'm afraid I've stolen this car now," Harry sighed, scratching his chin in thought. "No matter. Let me show you up to the guest rooms."

Harry had learnt to drive seventy eight years ago. Well, had been forced to drive needing to cover four thousand miles to reach a gateway along his glowing scar link. There had been other cars, other vehicles, since then – and the refresher in Western Australia a few weeks ago at Matt's

farm. He would have to see that man, and reimburse him for the property damage the vampires had caused. Return the taxi as well – but that would all have to wait.

With a wave of his hand Harry made the suitcases move through the side of the car and float ahead of him as he moved towards one of the doors on the left, and not the stairs. The others followed him. Through the door a smaller set of stairs led up to a large open room with a dozen windows that looked out onto a large crystal-blue ocean and golden sands. A perfect beach, devoid of humans and untouched by anyone in years.

“This is what I call the... living room,” Harry shrugged. “Good a name as any, I suppose. See those doors over there.” He pointed across the room, about a hundred feet away, to a series of five doors against the wall. “They open onto full bedroom suites with bathrooms and whatnot. You’ll be staying in there – it’s quite comfortable.”

“Which is your room, Harry?” Ginny asked.

Harry blinked and then smiled. “I haven’t picked one,” he said, stifling a yawn. “Not had much chance for sleep in the last week... not with everything....”

“Everything?” Hermione asked.

“You’re not the only people here,” he replied. “There are thirty men and women, members of the Muggle special forces. Soldiers. They’re staying a few floors up and about half a mile that way.” He pointed through the wall. “This house is huge inside and out, but you shouldn’t see them. They know you’re here, but you can’t let anyone know they’re here. A lot of laws, both Muggle and Wizard, have been broken – foolish laws, inadequate laws – but these men and women do have families.”

The room had a dozen sofas and chairs, as well as a full bar and food supplies. Part of the last week had been spent supplying this house and fortifying its defences. As it was, an Auror force could lay siege to this

house for a decade and never enter it. Voldemort, on the other hand, could probably break the house open in minutes if Harry wasn't here.

"What Wizarding laws have you broken, Harry?" Ron asked. "Besides the obvious ones, of course."

Harry yawned before answering. "Mainly the one against mixing magic and muggle technology. Technomancy, I think is the most widely used term for it."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak but Harry shook his head. "Later," he said. "Let's get you settled in—"

"I don't like any of this, Potter," Brian Granger growled, surprisingly angry for a dentist. He pushed his glasses up further onto his nose and pointed a finger at Harry. "You openly admit to breaking the law, you tell us our lives are in danger and that we're safe here. There are security guards at the Ministry of this country with your picture. This is not normal, you understand, and I think we deserve an explanation now as to what is going on!"

Harry's tired face hardened with each word, and, while she hadn't seen him really lose his temper in awhile, Hermione had always thought Harry was more frightening with a quiet anger. Like the kind she knew he was feeling now. Expecting an outburst or outright refusal, Hermione blinked when Harry said:

"Of course, take a seat." He motioned to the nearby chairs. They creaked under the weight of disuse but were magically strong. Harry himself remained standing before one of the windows, looking at Brian Granger without blinking and holding his hands behind his back.

His gaze flickered to Ginny once, and despite the confidence Hermione knew he felt, she also thought he was uneasy, perhaps fearful, about what to say. That wasn't Harry, something must be really wrong, really terrible, for him to display such a feeling openly.

“I’ve brought you here because this is the last safe stronghold on the entire planet that can hope to stand against Voldemort’s power,” Harry began. “With a wave of his hand Voldemort could topple Hogwarts, wipe a city off the map, slaughter thousands... with a wave of his hand, Voldemort could *melt* continents and boil oceans. The only thing that’s stopping him from doing that is me.”

The way he said that, Ginny thought, wasn’t boasting. Just a simple statement of the truth. Either way, they all knew it was the truth.

“Here, you are safe,” he continued. “Here *I* will know you’re safe. You can still visit the country, see the sights, but after that I’m going to have to insist you stay here. In time, I’ll offer the same protections to Dumbledore for Hogwarts, and you can return for your last year, Ron, Hermione... you as well, Ginny, but until then – you are all priority targets of the Death Eaters and even Voldemort himself, and I won’t have innocents close to me die.”

“And how many innocents have you killed over the years,” Brian Granger hissed. “Hmm? How many guilty, even?”

Harry didn’t blink at the question. *Millions, billions.* “More than you can possibly imagine,” he replied without emotion. His face neutrally calm. “But I did what had to be done. If I hadn’t... well, then *only* the innocent would have died. You’re a dentist, sir, not a master in war. You can’t possibly understand the sacrifices and responsibilities of that.”

“Well if you think we’re staying here you can just—”

“Do you love your family?” Harry cut in, fire blazing in his eyes. “Because I’m trying to save them, and whether or not you know it your arguments are in favour for having them murdered, casualties of war. I’ve seen a lot in my time, but one thing I know for certain, one Truth, is that death is final.

Always and absolutely. You’re an educated man, make the right choice.”

Oddly enough, Harry was reminded of something Allarius had said at

that moment:

Doing what you believe to be right, Potter, will always have a price in blood that the innocent around you will have to pay.

Oh yes, the demon had been full of many pearls of wisdom such as that. It had been right, on that occasion. Wrong, so wrong, on many others.

“We’ll stay,” Mr Granger growled after a long moment, looking to his wife for conformation. She nodded quickly and cast a somewhat fearful glance at Harry. “But not for you, Potter. When this is over, we’re gone, and I don’t want to see you again! We don’t want war!”

Harry shrugged and raised his palms towards the roof with a sigh. “I don’t want war, but it wants me – always has – as long as you stay alive, I would gladly stay away for the rest of your lives.”

I don’t expect to live until the end of this year anyway, Harry thought. The game is hard this time – too complex. I’m surrounded by enemies with nowhere to turn.

You’ll kick ass, Ethan offered in return. And if you die, then you die on your feet. Nothing less and nothing more.

At times, Ethan was more a part of him than they both realised.

“Has your loyalty ever wavered, Lucius?” the Dark Lord asked his longest serving Death Eater. An odd question, for a wizard who had served him from the beginning, had gone to Azkaban for him, and had trained his son to follow in his footsteps.

“Never, my lord,” Lucius replied, trying not to shiver. The very air seemed hung with crystals of ice in the presence of his master these days. No light could withstand the pulsating aura of darkness that emanated from the snake-like form of Lord Voldemort.

"The correct answer, of course," Voldemort mused. "And yet you are one of the few I believe. Tell me, how goes recruiting?"

"Three hundred new recruits within the last month, my lord," Lucius replied from behind his mask. His teeth were chattering, no matter how hard he tried to suppress it. Oh yes, he had definitely chosen the right side in this war. There was no stopping his master. "Since the world learnt that you summoned the storm demon, dark wizards all over the world have been flocking to your recruiters."

"Excellent," Voldemort whispered. "Excellent. Only those marked will survive the coming apocalypse. Only those whose loyalty was unwavering...."

Lucius refrained from caressing his Dark Mark. He would survive, as would his son and wife. But foremost, himself. The Mark ensured that.

"What new orders, my lord?" Lucius asked. The dark chamber in Slytherin Fortress was rotting and putrid, but all that paled aside Voldemort.

"Stonehenge, Lucius," Voldemort replied. His red eyes burnt with a strange intensity and his hands were shrouded in red light. "Where it all really began, where it all will end. Stonehenge, to open a way between worlds, to release an army of demons against the Darkslayer. To destroy Harry Potter!"

One hour later

Ginny moved across the room and put her hand on Harry's cheek. He sighed into it, holding his forehead with one hand and met her eyes calmly. *He's tired*, she thought, *very, very tired*.

"I'm tired," Harry said.

“Why don’t we go relax on the beach?” Ron offered, glancing out of the window at the sunny beach with its crystal blue sea. The bay looked very friendly, comforting.

“That might be a good idea,” Hermione said. “Let my parents get settled in....” There had been some harsh words shared between Hermione and her parents, and things were still a bit rough – but agreeable.

Harry shook his head. “I... em....” he began, and for the first time since he had been back Ginny saw Harry unnerved.

“What is it?” she asked, leading him down into the chair by the window.

Harry took a deep breath and, Ginny saw, he tried to hide his shaking hands. A blossom of fear bloomed in her stomach but she suppressed it. Whatever could unnerve Harry had to be truly awful.

“I’ve finished filling the pensieve,” he said quickly, hoarsely, and almost inaudibly. “What... what happened to me, the main parts... Merlin.... the main parts are in there. Hours worth, it’ll probably take a few days to get through....”

Surely... surely she could not see *tears* in Harry’s eyes. God, tears! Ginny felt beyond scared about what she might see in this basin of memory.

“What... what can we expect?” Hermione asked faintly.

Harry shuddered in her arms, and tried to suppress it. “Please don’t hate me....” he whispered. “Please.... I thought I could do this... I thought... God, I killed you all!”

“You’re scaring me, Harry,” Ginny said, holding him close. He wasn’t crying – he was close – but he wasn’t.

Grimly, Harry sat up straight and looked directly at the glass topped table

in between them and Ron and Hermione on the sofa. He growled and waved his hand, revealing a stone basin filled about an eighth of the way up. That could be about a week's worth of memory. It had been hidden under a bending of the light, making it invisible.

"I spent a few days filling it up, getting it done with," Harry said absently, staring into the silver liquid. He seemed detached, cold, not really talking to them but to himself... or something inside of him. "I don't want to see it – I don't! But I can't keep it from you... go in, I'll pull you out in an hour or two." Harry sighed again and held his head in his hands. "Please go," he finally said. "You have to know."

Ginny hugged him before moving over to the pensieve but Harry did not have it in him to return it. His friends offered him a worried, careful smile and then, in the blink of an eye – touched the silver memory in the basin and were sucked down into it.

Harry watched them go and then leaned back in his chair. *I'll just rest my eyes for five minutes*, he thought, *just five....*

He fell asleep for the first time in two days.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny found themselves floating in darkness with Harry – the memory of Harry – and followed him as he was thrown across Existence with his shoulder bleeding. They watched the Guardian approach, knowing nothing of what or who it was, and finally they were propelled along time and space – appearing in another world at Hogwarts.

"My God," Hermione breathed, looking around at the familiar yet different Hogwarts. A thought was all it had taken. "This is...."

They were all afraid now, as the memory jumped from Harry losing consciousness to waking up with people they knew to be dead around him. Sirius, his parents, a brother and sister he never knew.

It got worse, a lot worse, and it was only just the beginning. Soon enough they wanted to flee in terror, and rightly so, but they owed it to Harry to stay.

It will never be over, not for you, Darkslayer.

Existence was littered with debris and destruction, many threads of it simply burnt out, gone and lost – the Guardians were losing the age-old struggle to protect the Boundary. A calm had descended, or perhaps it was just the eye of the storm, but Harry knew it wasn't done yet.

Hadn't even begun.

Could he continue to ignore the growing degradation of the fabric? He didn't think so, and that thought made him want to die... but he knew if he did, it would be final, and eventually even the Land of the Dead would succumb to the weight of Existence ending, and be consumed into an eternity of darkness.

That couldn't happen – won't happen. It would come to him, if he didn't go to it. Destiny always did.

Harry awoke from his troubled dreams three hours after he had fallen asleep by the window. With a start, he jumped up and coughed, gazing out into the twilight world and the constant, perpetual crashing of the waves against the beach. He checked his watch and realised how long he had been asleep.

With a curse, Harry turned....

and beheld the pensieve. It was swirling, glowing, his friends were still in there.

Indecision clawed at Harry for a moment, but then he decided against

pulling them out. He had other plans that needed seeing to first. With a thought, he straightened his cloak, unfolded the creases, and Apparated across the house to what he had called the 'Workroom'.

There were five men and women already there when he arrived. Members of the crack British special services – this bunch from the SAS. The three women and two men saluted him when he arrived, as, once again; he had been given a field commission as Commander – Commander Potter.

"Evening, folks," Harry nodded and the five soldiers relaxed.

After his meeting with the Prime Minister a week ago, and the agreement they had forged, Harry had wasted no time building his force for which he would take over the world with. It still sounded grim when he thought about that, but that was what he was doing, he supposed. Thirty men and women had been hand picked by the Prime Minister, an ex-soldier himself, and his Ministers for War. All of them knew of the wizarding world, and the soldiers did after being told.

Discipline being life to a soldier, they took it all at face value – which is to say they didn't really react at all. A mission was a mission, and if this one dealt with... technology a little different from normal, so be it. Magic was technology, as they saw it.

"Commander," came five prompt replies from the highly trained soldiers. Each one was wearing a customised uniform with an array of gadgets and weaponry. At Harry's request, and after a week of fusing magic and muggle technology, none of the weapons were lethal unless made to be.

The Workroom was just that. Bench after bench of tools and equipment. On many of the benches Muggle guns sat glowing, or in pieces. Those glowing had yet to cool down from the spells and incantations Harry had changed them with, and that really was all that was holding up his plans at the moment.

Crystals, small and sleek covered the workbenches as well. Some were

glowing, some were dead, all were going to be used to store a charge of magic, given by Harry, that would last years. A replacement for the clips of bullets in the guns, these crystals would fire a variety of spells preset into the trigger. On the side of the weapons, a dial had been fitted. At Harry's order, all changed weapons were currently set to 'Stun'. There was an option for 'Kill'.

Just one of the things he had learnt at the Ways of Twilight, was a way to put magic into the crystal so that, given the right pressure, it exploded. Similar to the grenades these men and women used, each now carried a belt of grenade/crystals. Instead of a hellish explosion though, these crystals when activated exploded with a spiralling pulse of stunning magic.

Again, there was a more lethal variety – but no innocent would be killed by Harry's soldiers. If there was a skirmish with Death Eaters (or worse) however... well, everyone in the Workroom had killed before.

"These crystals pack a punch," the grizzled leader of this squad of soldiers said. He was a family man, wife and daughter, and had worked all over the world for his country. "Took out all of Bravo with one in a training exercise."

Beyond Harry using his real name, no one else in his force did – ever. There were thirty men and women in the house, sixteen men and fourteen women, and there were six squads of five people each. They were named as such – this squad, the one standing in front of Harry was Alpha Squad. Its leader was Alpha One, second-in-command Alpha Two, and so on until Alpha Five.

No names – no identification or anything. These soldiers were not affiliated with the United Kingdom. Their pay was quadrupled for this mission, but only if they returned alive and still under their cover. The Prime Minister, if questioned on this, would declare every one of them a mercenary – gun for hire – nothing more.

They did not exist.

The same for the remaining five squads of soldiers. Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Foxtrot, and Golf. No names, no ID – they were alone in this.

“You tested the crystals?” Harry asked Alpha One.

The man nodded, his sharp eyes meeting Harry’s stare for stare. “Worked just like you said they would, Commander – and better. Bravo never stood a chance. Took them four hours to wake up though....”

“Four hours is enough....” Harry nodded, picking up a crystal and twirling it in his hands. His thoughts kept fluttering back to the pensieve... no, not yet.

“When is our first mission, Commander?” Alpha One asked after a moment had gone by in silence. “The men – and women – are... excited, more than anything else, sir.”

Harry nodded towards the modified rifles and pistols all about the room. “Give these three more days, by then I should have the layout of our first target, and we’ll form a plan of attack.”

Alpha One nodded and licked his lips. “None lethal assault?”

“None lethal,” Harry agreed strongly, forcing the point home. “The majority of those we will be fighting are not our enemies... but follow orders from those unwilling to commit real forces to the Dark War... we have to remove them from that influence.”

Alpha One shrugged. He was a soldier, trained to follow orders, no matter what the mission. His country had ordered him to follow Potter, and Potter ordered him to this. So be it.

“I’d like a day to test the new weaponry before seeing combat, sir,” Alpha One said. “All squad leaders would.”

“You have it,” Harry nodded. “Four days then. But no more than that,

Alpha One. The time we have to unite this world can be counted in days, now.”

Less even, Ethan muttered. So much less... it is going to be close.

It always is by the end. Always... why is nothing ever really resolved without war? That has got to be a Great Truth.

Perhaps the Truth, Ethan offered. But I sure hope not.

“Yes, sir.”

These soldiers did not know the whole plan – not by far. Harry was the only one who knew that. But they knew more than Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. Which would change once they had all viewed the pensieve. That is, if they still wanted to know him. He had torn so much away, burnt and destroyed – brought chaos to countless billions – would they see him any different than Voldemort after this?

Sure hope so.

“I’ve a few more things to explain before we move on,” Harry said a moment later. “This.” He picked up a small circular silver button from the box on the table before him. He had made these last night, the work of five minutes or so. “This is a Portkey,” he told the Alpha team. “Attach it to your uniform. If you’re hit, taken down and can’t see a way out – just squeeze these silver discs and you’ll be transported through space back to this base.”

He handed the box to Alpha One. “They’ll work more than once,” he said. “Always have them on you. Insurance, sort of, to make sure we get you back. If we can help it, no one is going to die.”

The Alpha squad nodded and each accepted a silver disc, slipping it into a pocket on their uniforms, attaching it to a chain around the neck, or just holding onto it for now. Each soldier wore a shoulder plate, charmed against most spells – not Unforgivables, try as he might it was beyond

even Harry to protect against them – and on it was written their ‘name’. Alpha One had A1 on his right shoulder, Alpha Two – A2.

He had been surprised to find that he couldn’t offer protection against the Unforgivables. They were of a different sort of magic, and he just couldn’t block or shield them. It was... surprising. And a tad frightening.

It was the uniforms that Harry wanted to discuss next. They were very protective of most of the body, strong and durable, magically charmed to resist most spells, and light. But they... lacked a certain flare.

“All six teams have a new call sign as of today, Alpha One,” Harry said. “You will keep your phonetic designation, but as a whole you are now part of a force known as the Twilight Guardians.”

An apt name, in more ways than one.

“Twilight Guardians,” Harry continued. “In time, I think, you’ll come to understand just how important that is. In fact nothing is of greater importance,” Harry whispered, standing tall.

The pensieve was like a burrowing tick in the back of his mind, and he knew he had put it off long enough. Saying his goodbyes and issuing his final few commands to the men and women that would help him save the world, Harry Apparated back to the sitting room where the pensieve still shone and swirled.

“Okay....” he breathed, leaning forward to touch the silvery liquid. He hesitated and then clenched his fist, gritting his teeth. *You’re stronger than this*, he thought. *You lived through it, you can watch it!*

“Harry?” a voice from across the room called, and Harry looked up to see Janet Granger, Hermione’s mother, walk over and sit down in the chair opposite from where he stood. She was alone. “Is Hermione about?” she asked.

Harry nodded. “She’s in here,” he said, motioning to the pensieve. “It’s

sort of like a video player," he continued at Mrs Granger's wide eyed stare. "I'll... I'll get her out."

Taking a deep breath, Harry closed his eyes and threw all caution to the wind, diving head first into his terrible memories.

When he opened his eyes, Harry recalled very well where and when he was. He could even recall bits and pieces of what he thought at the time. After all, it was when he first began to feel Allarius pulling strings in the background of his mind.

"It was fun, guys," Trask said defiantly, against the misery of this place. "We saved a lot of lives..."

"That we did," whispered James, flexing his sore hand. A door handle had erupted into it. "And we have a few more to save yet."

Azkaban, the inescapable island fortress in the first world he had stepped in to after his own. It was in the final minutes of its existence – soon, very soon, Harry would jump from the roof as a griffin carrying his sister, only to fall into the icy waters of the sea below.

The pensieve had created the memory perfectly, almost regrettably so, and Harry watched himself walking grimly down the dank corridors of the prison. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny were there as well this time, standing with their arms wrapped around one another just a few feet away. The real Harry stood behind them silently as they watched him save the day yet again.

Before Harry approached his friends, the memory moved out onto the roof of Azkaban. Cedric Diggory, an Auror they had freed on the island was there with them – about to die again – and the roof was crawling with Death Eaters. The sky, quite openly, was overcast with twilight and a few dark storm clouds. Even this early in the game twilight had been haunting his footsteps.

A familiar face stepped onto the playing field above Azkaban.

"Well done, Harry," the familiar yet entirely different version of Ethan said. "Most impressive. My father has lost another fifty servants today - really a small price to pay to end your interference."

Ethan, Evil Ethan, on the roof of Azkaban. The one in Harry's mind laughed bitterly. *I was very stereotypically evil, wasn't I*, he mumbled. Harry eyed the dark cloak, the hard eyes and silently agreed.

"Dear Merlin...." Ginny breathed, upon recognizing Voldemort's flesh and blood. "It's him... he was... he was good in our world."

"Aye, he was," Harry agreed and stepped up alongside his friends for the first time since entering the pensieve. For a moment the memory was forgotten and Harry almost fell out of it in surprise when all three of his friends tackled him.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny whispered. She had reached him first. "Why didn't you tell us? This is awful...."

After a moment, Harry separated himself from his friends. "It doesn't have a happy ending," he told them. "And this is just the beginning."

As one, as four, they turned back to watch the nightmare atop of Azkaban unfold. Harry remembered, vaguely, thinking about fate a lot as he climbed the levels of the prison. He had even wondered if his life had been mapped out, planned by some storyteller – written by some author in some other world somewhere. FATE! Somewhere just as real as any of the world's he had visited, but where his life was at the mercy of a single imagination. Or even all the other versions of him who had died and failed were from other imaginations, other writers of stories. Creators... a Creator.

After all he had seen, he still did not know if that were true or not. He hoped it wasn't, but didn't care if it was. No, he did not care! Life was all

that mattered in the end, and love.

Life can end but love doesn't have to. As he relived Azkaban and his thoughts there, Harry felt that this time he was making the right choices in regards to love and friendship. A single glance at his friends, and Ginny – always for Ginny – told him that.

The rest of this memory streamed by in a blur, and Harry had only one more thought as he watched it unfold. Plans for entire worlds, for destiny, for the end of time and life were forgotten as he spoke, as he prayed, to the Creator, the Writer, to God, and called somewhat of a... truce, a bargain with that force.

Okay, God, he said, and Ethan heard him and grinned. I'll play your Game through to the end now – whatever end that may be – but after that I'm done. You hear me, Creator? One last dance, one last bet, and then I am done. You and I, we did big things, but I'm pulling out of the Game after this. If you're there, your cost is just too high....

But if he wasn't there... well... you cannot *blame* God for all that has happened and not believe in him at the same time. Harry believed, moreover he *knew* God existed. Perhaps He didn't anymore. No matter, Harry had made his choice now. The Game was almost done with.

And just like that, with that choice, Existence took another turn down a dark and uncertain path that either forked towards its salvation or its ultimate destruction. Which fork in the road had been taken by Harry now would not be known until the last roll of the dice.

The last flip of the coin.

The memory exploded, Azkaban exploded, and Harry watched himself tumble into the icy sea, but he didn't really see it. A small smile played around his lips, and a maddening laughter resounded in his head.

Oh yes, he was sure his... *prayer*... had been heard by something. There were many watchers in his mind, silent observers of the Great

Game.

Let them make of it what they will, Ethan said. They know you're mortal, know you're powerful, know that you will never be broken... they also know that you're backed into a corner with nowhere to turn and that, that, Harry, scares the hell out of them! You have always been your most dangerous when your back is up against the wall.

Chapter 12 – Twilight Guardians

*Even memory is not necessary for love.
There is a land of the living and a land of
the dead and the bridge is love, the only
survival, the only meaning.*

~~Thornton Wilder

June 25th, 1997

That Wednesday began like any other, but that was always the way of these things. On days such as these, one could expect roiling thunder clouds, a feeling in the air, a glimpse of the impossible happening, but more often than not it just feels like another ordinary day.

To Harry, anyway.

Today was the day he made his first move against a Ministry that had denied him in the International Confederation. Today he would overthrow the Australian Ministry and, for all intents and purposes, make himself Minister. For a time, anyway.

So with that planned, Harry started his day with a bowl of cornflakes and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. Ginny had insisted – said he was too pale, even – and watched him swallow every spoonful. It was unnerving, in a way, as he and his friends sat around the breakfast table.

“And you need more sleep,” Ginny pressed him. “We’ve been here four nights and I bet we’ve had more sleep in one than you have in all four!”

Harry shrugged, swirling around the last few soggy cornflakes. “More sleep,” he said in agreement. It probably wouldn’t happen, but it would appease her. She just stared at him as if she knew he had told her what she wanted to hear.

“I want to ask you something about the pensieve, Harry,” Hermione said after a moment of silence had fluttered away. “To do with time.”

Always and never it was time – we are ruled by it.

Thoughts of the pensieve made Harry want to shudder but he suppressed it and waved Hermione on. He had a fair idea what she wanted to ask though

“We’ve seen memories of you in this... this other world!” she exclaimed, and her eyes widened at the implications. “But the date is later in that other world. You were there longer than two months, and yet you got back to... you got home in less than that. Did you... I can’t understand? Does time flow differently there, or in the Boundary or Stream?”

Harry sighed. “Time doesn’t flow at all in the Boundary, it exists outside of time, but the Stream... if you can fight the currents then you can go to any time in any of the mortal worlds. The Guardian told me that, and don’t I have a surprise in store for you about him! No, you’re right – the times don’t match, but I can’t explain it. You’ll just have to... watch it.”

They hadn’t quite reached his Nundu fight yet, where he lost an eye, and, whilst Harry tuned his plans yesterday, Ron, Hermione and Ginny had spent yet another few hours living Harry’s memories. They were passed

the Trafalgar Square bombing, and nearing the Nundus. After that things got faster... well, after the battle with Allarius things started to skip ahead in years, but it would take time. There were at least three or four days worth of memory in the pensieve still to be viewed.

"Did you travel through time?" Ginny asked. She sat next to him, her hair tied in a long braid down to her waist. Her skin was clear, fresh, and glistened softly in the sunlight through the window of this part of the house, just through the sitting room and the suites where they were all staying.

"Eventually, I did," Harry said, fighting back the tremors.

"How?" Hermione urged. "Time turners only take you back a few hours, a day at the most. Harry... you must have gone back *weeks!*"

"Quite a few weeks," Harry agreed wryly, running a hand through his messy hair. "Just watch it... I wouldn't want to spoil the ending."

"Did you fight Evil Ethan?" Ron asked, piling some more toast onto his plate. Jam and margarine as well. He was also fond of Coca-Cola, the Muggle drink, of which Harry had stocked several pallets of in the storeroom. Paid for in full, of course. He wasn't a thief.

Yeah, he did, Ethan grumbled. *And I gave him an ass-whooping!*

"Near the end, I did," Harry answered Ron, chuckling in his head at Ethan's response.

Ron nodded, bit his lip, and then blurted out another question. "Did you kill him?"

I wasn't that lucky, Ethan sighed.

Long since adjusted to who and what he was, Harry just shook his head. "No, I didn't kill him."

What did you do to me? Ethan wondered, and Harry felt he was talking more to himself than, well, himself. Ethan was talking to himself, in Harry's mind, and Harry didn't know how to answer the question anyway.

"My parents have decided to spend a few days here, on the beach in the sun," Hermione said suddenly, trying to move the conversation away from death. "But they still want to take me up to the Gold Coast for a few days, and the Great Barrier Reef."

"Just tell me when," Harry nodded, filing the knowledge away. He was wearing a black cloak over a tight fitting sleeveless shirt and leather pants, with strong magically warded boots, and around his left wrist was a band of metal, secured tightly – that had just begun to vibrate. It meant the Twilight Guardians were ready.

Harry checked his watch – 0900 – right on time.

"Well," he said. "Do you... do you want to go back into the pensieve?"

His friends had been uncomfortable jumping into it without his permission, and even more uncomfortable about asking him to view the memories that pained him so much, so Harry gave them the option now. He needed to, anyway. It was time to get on with the day.

Slowly Ginny nodded and Ron and Hermione imitated her. Although they were pretty much in the same room as the glowing pensieve on the coffee table, it was still a walk of two minutes across that room. The sitting room was huge, the centre of a series of suites and bathrooms, the kitchen and even a small library. Hermione had spent a few hours in the large one downstairs – the one that even the Hogwarts library paled against.

"I've been researching this Darkslayer, like you asked," Hermione said to Harry as they moved across the room. "I haven't found much... well, I haven't found anything, Harry. I need to know more."

That prophecy was always on the edge of Harry's thoughts, gnawing at him when he had a calm moment. He knew that he knew nothing about it, just that it was about him. Voldemort seemed to know more – but there was a greater chance of the sun rising in the west than of Voldemort telling him. He sighed.

"I'm the Darkslayer," he said. "Which you already knew." He glanced at her sideways and caught her quick nod. Ron held her hand, and Ginny came to his right and took his. "I know next to nothing, less, even, but the vampires knew something, I think. That might help. One of them could have actually spoken the prophecy. You'll see what I mean when you get to the memories of Hogwarts being attacked again."

"Anything else?" Hermione asked hopefully.

Harry grinned, coldly, it didn't reach his eyes – but then, not much else did either. "I'm feared in more than one reality...." he whispered. "Stick to older books on prophecy."

Not much to go on, not much at all – but more than she knew a minute ago. It might help, it might. Harry wrapped his arms around Ginny just once, not wanting to worry her, before they fell into the pensieve. He checked his watch – 0903 – and promptly Apparated across the house into a large chamber that would have been used, at one point, for speeches at dinner parties or something equally frivolous now.

He appeared before thirty heavily armed, heavily trained, heavily shielded and heavily charmed individuals. Each carried a long black automatic rifle, which still shone faintly and crackled with blue sparks at the edge of the barrel. The thirty British soldiers didn't blink an eye when he appeared on the stage at the head of the large empty room.

Earlier in the week Harry had destroyed the dining tables and other furniture and replaced them with steel benches, chairs, and an armoury. The armoury was a steel cage, locked at all times, in which he had been building a store of arms more deadly than any other in this world, and many others.

The soldiers saluted as he stepped forward, cloak still swaying from the Apparation, and clasped his hands behind his back. He nodded to them respectfully. They had earned his respect, after all. None of them had panicked at magic, and none of them had fled after he had thoroughly explained what the future could hold.

“Good morning,” he began. “Today we make an enemy of the entire world, but only to save it.”

Not quite true. He had a sprinkling of allies – one or two – and some would see he was doing the right thing. Especially when no one, save Death Eaters, died for it.

The soldiers were all dressed similarly. The only difference was the letter and number on their left shoulder plates. Standing near the front of six separate groups of soldiers, were six separate men and women, and on their shoulders were the following designations: A1, B1, C1, D1, E1, and F1.

Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo, and Foxtrot. Six squads and each of them had magically warded armour and a number of charms on them that cancelled those used by the Ministries to distract or repel or persuade Muggles. For the only magical person in the room was Harry.

Also, on the chest piece of the Kevlar armour was a white rose, etched right into the piece. Like on his banner, the drops that, in times of peace would be dew, were blood. The rose was crying blood and it stained the white petals.

“You are the elite,” Harry continued. Standing tall with his hands clasped behind his back. Whether he knew it or not, he cut an impressive powerful figure. The soldiers saw it, recognised a born leader, and knew they followed a just cause. “The Twilight Guardians will become known as the first line of defence against the Dark Lord. You will be the best because you are the best – and the world will know it.”

Each and every one of the soldiers stood taller, looked grimmer, and handled their weapons expertly. As well as the automatic rifle, which would fire stunning balls of magic at a rate of two thousand a minute – an astounding rate – they carried a sidearm designed to do the same as the rifle but at a much slower rate. Instead of explosive grenades, on their belts they carried shining crystals. Again, these crystals only stunned anyone in their path, but they could take out a whole room if needs be.

Every member of the six squads was shielded against stunners, of course, and there was no doubt that some people at the Ministry would be as well. So the rifles had other functions, other disabling settings. A dial fitted to the right side of the body of the weapon had the following settings:

Stun
Shock
Kill

Shock needed some explaining. It fired a ball of magic, again at a rate of two thousand per minute, but this magic didn't stun like the stunning spell did. This one hurt, like a high voltage electric shock, and could cause death in extreme cases, but wouldn't if used sparingly and wisely. The majority of victims would be stunned harmlessly.

The 'Kill' setting was another thing altogether. Much to Harry's disappointment, he had been unable to make that setting fire at a rate of two thousands shots a minute. With that rate, a five man squad could wipe out an entire country. But the crystals simply were not strong enough to take that much magic from so strong of a spell. It wasn't the Killing Curse, Avada Kedavra – that could not be tamed – but a lesser curse that could be blocked.

Vestic!

Purple spheres of the light exploded from the barrels of the weapon and grew to the size of a soccer ball or so, before streaming across the air towards the intended target. The gun could only manage a rate of twelve

a minute – after that the crystal exploded. Harry had had to heal three men earlier in the week to find that out. They had been burnt pretty badly.

Also, beneath the main barrel of the weapon was a smaller, secondary barrel. From this a small hook attached to a strong rope could be fired. Strong enough to hold up to two hundred kilograms, at least.

Still, it was a lot faster than a wand. That, plus the element of surprise, would be Harry's biggest advantage today.

"After today," Harry continued up on the stage. "After today you are in this to the end. The world is going to need every soldier it can get in the coming months, and it is you people, and those that will follow, who will show the world that."

An army was what he needed; an army was what he'd get. Not all of them would be Twilight Guardians – not many at all – because, as he had said, that was the elite squad. The people who would show the rest the way. No, he'd leave the Aurors as Aurors. A world of united Aurors from every nation he conquered.

It was a good plan, a little rough around the edges but doable... maybe, with luck. No, not luck – hard work and a hell of a lot of determination.

"Now, be ready," Harry said finally. "I'll open a gateway and then it will begin. Remember – no killing."

Without another moment of hesitation Harry did just that.

Heads or tails? Ethan asked.

In the centre of the room a long *doorway* opened in the air, cut through reality and joined one thread of the canvas of this world with another thread of the same world. It was, really, a lesser version of the gateways between worlds. A tunnel that connected two points in one world.

At times like this, Harry was shaken when he remembered that with a thought he could open this gateway, a feat beyond all the magical folk on this world, and with another thought he could scour continents, turn mountains into fiery volcanos... end time.

On the other side of the gateway, in the foyer of the Australian Ministry with all its steel furniture and tinted windows, Ministry personnel stopped in shock as they looked back through the gateway and into the house – at Harry and the Twilight Guardians. Some froze, some screamed, some dropped whatever they were holding.

Harry ran ahead, issuing swift commands for the Twilight Guardians to follow him. They all had their missions inside the Ministry, were all supposed to secure a certain area. Alpha Squad was with Harry up to the top floor and the current Minister's office. Bravo, Charlie, and Delta were to take out the Aurors. Echo and Foxtrot were to secure the foyer.

Harry had walked through the entire Australian Ministry hidden in plain sight in a lower level of reality. He knew the layout, had sketched it for the Twilight Guardians, and knew he would need them if he was to secure the Aurors and stop them from abandoning the Ministry when he took it over. As painful as it could be, he needed fear to rule these men and women until Voldemort made his first move.

And he would, Harry knew. Voldemort would do something – and thousands would die, perhaps millions, for it. But you can't save everyone. Only then would the world see he was in the right... well, some would. You can't have all the cake, but if you're lucky you can get more than one slice.

Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living, Ethan whispered, as Harry stepped through the gateway.

Uncertain about what was going on, some people gaped when they recognised Harry – others began to run, which was wise. Harry stepped through, flanked by thirty men and women, and raised his glowing palms.

Arcs of fire raged from those deadly palms and spiralled through the air, scorching the ceiling and blazing across the windows. They were harmless to flesh, but very impressive – something to fear. His voice, magically amplified, boomed across the busy foyer.

“I AM HARRY POTTER!” he roared. The Twilight Guardians, all of them excellent marksmen (and markswomen) opened fire at those reaching for their wands. About ten had so far stepped past Harry and were heading down the left and right flanks. Another squad manoeuvred in front of him and two remained on his back whilst the gateway remained open. “I AM HARRY POTTER, THE LORD OF TWILIGHT! SURRENDER OR DIE!”

It was an empty threat, but they didn’t know that. Also, the things being written about him in the newspapers made him sound very capable of cold-blooded murder. He was, in a way, and that terrified him.

Alpha and Bravo moved swiftly, almost like they were floating, in front of him, and the very air turned red with their barrage of stunning spheres being propelled from the weapons at an enormous rate. At the elevators at the end of the hall, Alpha moved away and Bravo entered the lift, accompanied by Charlie and Delta. It was their job to secure the Auror offices.

Intelligence, what Harry had counted the other day, said there were three hundred Aurors currently upstairs. Fifteen Twilight Guardians was more than enough. Unless the Aurors were quick with the Avada Kedavras.... Harry expected casualties of his forces, maybe....

Echo and Foxtrot, five men and five women, had moved behind the still open gateway and were firing at a gathering of Aurors around the main door of the Ministry. A large revolving door. The Aurors there had been fast, knocking over nearby desks and counters, creating sloppy barricades that protected them against the storm of stunners.

As Harry watched, and only about twenty five seconds had passed since

he opened the gateway, one of the Guardians was knocked back ten feet or so by a bone breaking hex. Their armour repelled the actual spell, but not the force of it.

Alpha were, in a way, Harry's guards. Not that he needed any, but it made sense – and helped win the soldiers loyalty. Setting to work now, Harry began to mentally attack the buildings wards. Quickly, he created his own anti-apparation ward around the entire building, disabled the floo hubs and put up a Portkey Net.

A Portkey Net was something of his own making. It *caught* outgoing Portkey travel and stopped it. Caught it in a net and brought the user back to the point they left. No one was getting out. This would be a clean takeover, a renouncing of power and an assuming of one.

A lot of the civilians in the foyer were cowering and dodging fire anyway they could. Not many had drawn their wands and now not many could Apparate away. Some were unconscious, having run into the stunners; others were under desks, behind tables or counters. A few were just face down on the floor with their hands over their heads.

None were dead, and all of the Twilight Guardians were standing.

A rainbow of spells were centred on Harry as Alpha knelt around him, providing covering fire as he worked his magic against the Ministry wards. Raising his arms, he deflected the blue, red, yellow, purple, green, and white lights up into the roof of the foyer. When they struck, a large jagged crack rippled across the roof, showering down plaster onto those below.

"To the lifts," Harry whispered, but his voice was still amplified. Alpha heard him well and began to move off.

Harry just walked. As chaos reined around him and the last few Aurors and those civilians who'd put up a fight hid behind their cover, firing off an odd spell, Harry walked across the foyer like he *owned* the place and into one of the large open lifts. Similar to the elevators in the British

Ministry, Alpha got in around him and closed the golden grille.

Three minutes, the target aimed for, was all it had taken for fifteen soldiers, plus Harry, to secure the foyer in the Australian Ministry of Magic. Further up in the building, Harry could hear the churning of the automatic rifles belonging to Bravo, Charlie and Delta. The Auror offices were under siege.

As planned, Alpha One hit the button for the ninth floor and the lift took off. Harry silently hoped that no one had died in the disaster strewn foyer. Once it was secure, the two squads, Echo and Foxtrot, were ordered to heal anyone they could the Muggle way. There should be no need, unless someone had gotten in the way of one of the Aurors' nastier spells.

"End of the hall, ten Auror guards," Harry repeated his instructions for the Minister's floor. With luck, the Aurors on other floors wouldn't know what had happened until the takeover was complete.

As they rose through the almost too quiet building in the lift, Harry felt a lot of people pushing against all of his wards. The anti-Apparation, the Portkey net, and the disabled floo outlets. None of them were going anywhere.

The lift grille opened onto a long corridor. One side looked out from a high rise over Canberra in a long line of tinted large windows. The floor was grey carpet, and another plaster wall ran along to the right with various doors and portraits along its length. At the end of the corridor, a set of ornate wooden doors stood barred with a squad of ten Aurors guarding it. They had heard him coming.

The lift opened and instantly Harry and the five Guardians were not in a safe place to be. The Aurors had a clear shot with whatever curses they wished. From his observations earlier in the week, Harry had learnt that these Aurors, the Minister's Guard, were given permission to kill – to use the Killing Curse.

At the sight of Harry, and five heavily armed *Muggles*, they did just that.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Ten curses, fired as soon as the grille was up down the empty corridor, which was about one hundred metres long. Harry and Alpha had prepared for this, had expected it.

Harry raised his right palm and fired a transparent shockwave of power at the large windows. They exploded, shattered outwards, and the five Guardians immediately engaged the hooks in the secondary barrel of their automatic weapons. Aiming at the floor, five identical small silver hooks were thrust into the ground with enough pressure to propel a cricket ball into orbit.

The hooks held, and a rope spiralled out from within the guns. The five members of Alpha jumped out of the open broken windows and into the air. They fell all of six feet before the ropes went taut and dangled from the window whilst Harry dealt with the Aurors.

Harry stepped forward to meet the Avada Kedavra curses. Out of his left eye he caught the black-armoured Twilight Guardians jump out of the window and as they did he crossed his arms across his chest and reached for the two glittering swords of Gryffindor.

They appeared, as always, with a shower of red and golden sparks. Harry was fairly high up above the city and a cool wind blew in through the window, messing up his hair and cloak.

Seven seconds had passed since the elevator grille opened, and it was then that the ten green Killing Curses descended upon Harry. A wall of death, and he stood against it.

Well... not *stood*. Harry knelt down on one knee and bowed his head, holding the two swords before him in a cross across his body. Whatever magic was in the swords had been enough, one hundred years ago, to split the Avada Kedavra curse in two. Harry and Ethan learnt that the

hard way, but now it was perfect.

Seven of the ten curses missed Harry completely, going to his side or over his head, meant for the Twilight Guardians, but three of them did hit his glowing swords, and were split against those old and deadly blades.

One green curse hit the blades just where they crossed, and that was split into four different smaller streams. One went up before Harry, hit the ceiling and brought down small chunks of brick and plaster upon him. One part went down, eating through the floor and the remaining two pieces fled to his left and right.

The other two full curses hit the tips of his swords at the same time. Symmetrically, they veered away to the left and right. One flew out of the open window and another hit the wall on his right. Several portraits went up in flames. An inferno of icy heat washed over him, the fingers of death, and squeezed his heart. With a supreme effort of will, Harry fought it off.

The other seven full curses that had missed him impacted against the open elevator. It simply melted, exploded, fell away back down the shaft screaming and screeching the whole way. It left a trail of sparks that were hot enough to light the shaft on fire, the belt and the pulley chain. Most of the wall nearby disappeared in a cloud of dust that billowed out and veiled Harry from the ten Aurors' sight.

That's when he made his move.

Harry *jumped*, stepped once and was all the way down the corridor in a blur, having travelled close to the speed of light. The journey cushioned by magic. One millisecond he was standing one hundred metres away from the Auror force, and still in that same millisecond he stood before them with a cool grin.

Before the men and women had a chance to think, Harry disarmed them all with a thought and spun their wands back down the hall. Aurors were highly trained, and at the loss of their wands some made a dive for their secondary wands, hidden around their bodies.

Most of them did, anyway. A big bloke with hard eyes and arms like tree trunks took a swing at Harry. He broke his hand against Harry's jaw, around which a small shield just a millimetre thick rested. The man howled, and at that moment every one of the Aurors fell stunned to the ground.

A barrage of stunning spheres converged around Harry, and he turned to see Alpha back inside and on their feet. Three hundred stunning spells propelled the ten Aurors back into the door on which they were now slumped unceremoniously.

None of the stunners touched Harry. They came close, but never touched him.

And with that, the Ministry was basically his. A few small things remained to be done, but it had been almost pathetically easy. Ten minutes work.

Aware that quite a bit of damage had been inflicted upon the building, and from the sounds of things was still being inflicted below in the Auror offices, Harry merely flicked open the magically locked doors before him with a thought. He didn't act rashly and blast them off their hinges.

With the Alpha Guardians flanking him, Harry stepped through the clean and meticulous room on the other side of the doors – noted the desk and table, waiting chairs, and knew this was for the Minister's secretary, and that the Minister himself should be beyond the door ahead.

It was a simple door, like millions of others, and Harry knocked before entering. With a small smile playing around his lips, he entered the office of the Australian Minister for Magic. Five heavily armed Twilight Guardians followed him.

"Don't move, son!"

A lot had changed since Harry had entered the magical world on his eleventh birthday. A lot had changed the first year he was born. It

seemed that no matter how hard he tried to escape war, dodge fights, they always found him. Rarely a week went by these days when he wasn't caught in some titanic struggle for his life.

So it was then, as the Minister, flanked by a single Auror, gaped at him, that Harry disarmed the man with a thought and tossed the wand aside. There was really only one thing on this planet that could harm him – and that was Voldemort. Everything else was... good practice? No, wasted time? No... child's play.

That'd do.

Harry recognised the Minister from the International Confederation. He had been one of the first, after America, to deny him and his wisdom that day. One of the first to doom the world in order to keep peace for a little while longer. There was no excuse for that – none at all. Voldemort had done and killed enough to be considered a world threat.

“Good morning, Minister,” Harry inclined his head. “Although I should say ex-Minister.”

The man was of average height and was right now trying to meet eyes with Harry from around the side of his large desk. He had thinning grey hair and a moustache, greyish eyes and reminded Harry a lot of what he could remember of Cornelius Fudge.

The little Fudge-clone was red with rage. His real name was William Orison, and he had been Minister of Australia for the last three months. The previous Minister, a man who had given two hundred and fifty Aurors to England, was ousted after two hundred of those Aurors were slaughtered at Hogsmeade.

“Now see here!” Orison exclaimed. “You... you... you... you....”

“I, I, I, I, I'm taking over,” Harry smiled. “As of right now you are no longer Minister of this country. I am.”

Five rifles were pointed at the man and his wandless Auror from behind Harry, and Harry himself had sparks crackling across his eyes. Fear is a powerful tool, if used correctly. Harry didn't need these people to like him – they could hate him for all it would matter in the end, but as long as they feared him... well, it was one way to rule.

"You can either leave peacefully or in a box," Harry continued, his voice grim, eyes hard, fists clenched. "The Auror forces in this building have been disabled by my Twilight Guardians. No one has been killed, but that will change if you refuse to give up your office."

Harry waved his hand towards the fire place and for a moment green flames roared into existence. "This floo hub has been reactivated. Make the right choice and give up your power without giving up your life."

William Orison was ninety eight and had lived through several wars, had spent a career becoming Minister, and had, in the end, been swayed by the Americans and others into avoiding becoming caught in the war raging in the United Kingdom. It was also what gained him the office three months ago – promises to stay out of this Dark War. Now though, now....

Orison fled. He knew when he was beaten. No fighter, the man scurried to the floo casting fearful glances at Harry Potter and the Muggles he had brought with him. Muggles! This boy would reshape the world before he was done, Orison knew that much, and was more than a little relieved that now he would not have to worry about it.

Harry watched the ex-Minister disappear in an explosion of green flames. He didn't care where he went.

"Alpha One," Harry said when he was gone, turning his eyes onto the unarmed Auror who was standing behind the Minister's desk, arms crossed over his chest and unflinching. A hard man.

"Commander," the broad shoulder Alpha leader replied.

“Take your Guardians and do a sweep of the stairs floor by floor and bring me a report on any casualties – our side or theirs – and order everyone you find into the auditorium annex out of the foyer.”

“Sir,” Alpha One said, saluting before leading his team back out into the hallway. The elevator was, of course, so much scrap metal now. It would have to be the stairs.

When they were gone, Harry calmly gazed around what he supposed was now his office. All of the occupants of the portraits save a brave few had long since fled, and they were all of previous Ministers. A few muttered choice comments whilst Harry took in the room. A single desk looked out over Canberra from the three large panes of glass. From here Harry could see the Muggle parliament. He mused briefly over that before turning to the unarmed Auror.

“Who are you?” he asked.

The man didn’t flinch. “Steven Cornwall, Deputy Minister and Head of the Auror Department.”

Harry stood in his usual position. Standing tall with his hands clasped behind his back. He could taste magic on the air and almost see its weaves and residues. “Do you wish to keep your position for as long as I am in charge here?”

Cornwall gritted his teeth and smoothed his robes, staring intently at Harry. “I was in Hogsmeade on March 20th,” he said. “I saw you there... I know you saved as many Aurors, my Aurors, as you could. What are your reasons for doing what you have now done?”

“I’m sending Australia to war. There is no chance, whatsoever, of saving this world from Voldemort if all of our magical nations are not united as one front, under one leader.”

“And you believe you have what it takes to do this? Lead so many to

war? Forgive me, but you're a teenager."

Harry laughed. He instinctively liked this man. At least some people in the world still possessed a backbone. "I swear on my magic and on my life that I'm doing this for the world, and that I do have the experience needed to fight this war. I've been fighting it for a long, long time. There will be death, and blood, before the end, but I'll swear a Wizard's Oath, an Unbreakable Vow even, to do the best for the world."

The Auror blinked when Harry tossed him his wand back with a thought. "Something tells me not to doubt you, Potter... or should I say Minister?"

Harry shrugged. "Call me Harry."

One Hour Later

Several thousand people had been crammed into the large auditorium, used for press conferences, just through the large doors in the foyer opposite the lifts. Several thousand people sat in a daze as, for the first time in history, their Ministry had been taken over by a foreign force.

Harry surveyed the anxious crowd before him. Many looked dazed, an after effect of the stunners, some angry, others frightened – the majority seemed frightened – and it was at him they cast their fearful glances. Him and the fifteen Guardians behind him. The other fifteen were at the back of the room, silent sentinels holding enough firepower to quiet any unrest.

For a moment then, Harry felt unbelievably sad that everything had turned out this way. He thought that if everything went on like this for much longer, there would be no hope left to fight the future, to fight Voldemort. It wouldn't do if he killed Voldemort, only to take his place as the most feared wizard on the planet.

All he wanted, all he had ever wanted, was a normal life. Great men

dream of such things – the mundane, the everyday, the normal. Harry dreamed of monsters, of Death itself, and of Twilight. Always of twilight.

He realised he had already begun to speak before his mind caught up with him. “I am now your Minister of Magic,” he said to the silent crowd. “The previous Minister has abandoned his post and therefore his claim to the position. As I have assumed control of this building I am now the Minister. That is final, for now, for the war.”

Steven Cornwall stood warily behind him. The man was pale, shock obviously holding him. He was fighting it though. Over the last hour Harry had come to an agreement with the man, an agreement sealed with a Wizard’s Oath – a real one, sworn on magic. If Steven broke it his magic would leave him, die, and his body soon after. The same for Harry.

They would not break it.

As Deputy Minister, and Head of the Aurors, this man was everything he needed to control Australia whilst he turned his sights on to other... gains. Cornwall would act as Minister, under Harry’s orders, and begin training more Aurors, sending them over to England, and keeping this country running. The Aurors would follow him – he was something of a legend, apparently. On the scale of Mad Eye Moody but without the paranoia.

“Life, for the most part,” Harry continued, “will go on as normal. The workday is still nine to five,” he said that with a smile, but the people seated before him seemed to nervous to laugh.

There had been a few broken bones but those had been quickly healed once the fighting was over. No one had died, thankfully, and every Auror had been given back their wand as a sign of good faith. Steven Cornwall had commanded them not to fight, that the previous Minister had indeed abandoned them (not that he’d had much choice) and that Harry Potter was in charge for now.

There were velvet drapes aligning the smooth white walls in the

auditorium, all of them bearing the crest of the Australian Ministry. A native flower, wrapped around a silver wand. Harry raised his hands and, in between those banners and drapes, cast his own.

A resounding gasp echoed through the crowd as azure, the colour of twilight, drapes, marked with the Bleeding Rose, fell out of the air and joined their crest. Beyond the gasps, no one uttered a single word. To do so, the crowd thought, would mean death.

"I also want it to be known that Australia is now at war against the Dark Lord Voldemort," Harry continued. No one said anything. "Voldemort is the single greatest threat facing the world, and with his destruction I will renounce my position as Minister. I'm only here for the war...."

Thousands fidgeted in their seats, obviously not happy with being at war. The Aurors, seated in the front rows, nodded resignedly. Some had already fought against Voldemort, and Harry could see grim determination on those faces. It seemed they had already accepted his role now. A large part of that rough loyalty probably went to the fact that he hadn't killed anyone in his takeover.

Still, Ethan muttered, I think if someone was about to stab you in the back, none of these people would say a thing.

Harry agreed, and resisted the urge to look over his shoulder.

"From this moment on, Deputy Minister Steven Cornwall will be your acting-Minister. Any questions you have for me will go through him. Good day." He nodded to the thousands of Ministry employees and, with Cornwall, Apparated back up to the Minister's office.

The Twilight Guardians would stay behind to oversee the repairs and to make sure no one tried anything... stupid.

Harry collapsed into the minister's large leather chair with a sigh, running his neck in circles to work out a few aches. "How'd you think I went?" he asked Cornwall.

The Auror shrugged. "Who can say, Minister? It is too early. They fear you, certainly, and I think at the least we can expect a few assassination attempts."

Harry grinned. "I'd be insulted if there wasn't. But you'll need protection, as well. You're cooperating with me and that puts you on the 'To Kill' list of a lot of people."

Cornwall grinned and then seemed surprised that he had done so. Harry felt that he was a laid back kind of person – took life as it came. Loyal, cared for the Aurors under him. Harry had met his type before. Quiet, but not shy. Slow to anger but dangerous when he was. A man who would be found at the front lines of a battle, first to take a hit, last to drop. There were too few of those people in any world.

"I want you to begin the interrogations immediately," Harry said and Cornwall nodded. This was not part of their Oath, but it was the right course of action.

A full interrogation of every member of the Ministry. To uncover spies, Death Eaters or Death Eater supporters, dark wizards... anyone associated with anything like that. Harry expected to find a fair few.

"I'm authorising the use of Veritaserum. Any Death Eaters you find, any with the Mark, are to be executed," Harry continued, his voice hard and his eyes chips of stone. "Do you understand, Cornwall?"

Stephen Cornwall did, and was once again reminded that he was not dealing with an underage wizard here. There was a harsh, cold, and unforgiving monster buried in the scarred and insane Harry Potter. Merlin, Cornwall feared him like the rest.

"Inform me, use a Twilight Guardian – they have a way of contacting me – when the interrogation is complete. I've ordered these executions, so I'll watch them." It was, he thought, the least of his responsibility to this nation now.

But he could not feel sorry or regret for the Death Eaters who would die in the next few days. It was a war, a war on a greater scale than any knew save Harry, and those individuals with the Dark Mark had chosen a side when they let Voldemort brand them.

“How do you want it done?” Cornwall croaked. His voice wavered.

As hard as it was to say, Harry said it, “Find someone willing to be an executioner. Use gold or whatever,” he mumbled, waving his hand absentmindedly. “The Vestic Curse should do the job.”

You’re a harder man than I, Ethan whispered. You’re a harder man than any, Harry. Don’t lose yourself over this.

Harry clenched his fists when they began to shake. He wasn’t as hard as everyone thought, not by a long shot. He felt sick to his stomach. “Leave me,” he whispered to the Deputy Minister. “Begin your interrogations. Make a thorough search for the Mark.”

Harry was left alone, pale and scared of what he was capable of in that office of power. No doubt right now news was travelling all across the world that he had overthrown the Ministry. Voldemort would know of it, and it would make him pause for thought. Dumbledore would know, and Harry believed the old man would be disappointed, perhaps a little surprised.

None of them could see the truth, could possibly understand the truth. He was the Darkslayer, one of Existence’s biggest jokes, he thought scornfully – hating himself. He did what had to be done, and had long ago been damned for it.

Survival of the fittest didn’t count for much when you juggled entire universes.

But no, Harry sat there alone, thinking of Ginny, by God it was always Ginny. His last anchor to a life that had almost abandoned him, to a life

he had destroyed – an innocent life, where his Godfather fell through a veil, where one of his worries had been his OWL results.

What would Ginny think about the executions?

What would Ron and Hermione think?

They were the three that mattered.

Alone with your thoughts, Harry, Ethan sighed. If you were not already clearly insane this could drive you mad....

Be quiet, Ethan, Harry growled. It came out as half anger, half plea. His strength had fled fast.

Harry had left the floo open in this office, closing it had slipped his mind after the previous Minister fled....

So it was Albus Dumbledore who found him some time later, head in his arms, silently cursing himself against the broad oak desk and fighting back tears. Dumbledore strode across the room silently; so far he had not made any noise, and calmly sat down opposite Harry – again without a sound.

The old Headmaster linked his hands before him and did not say anything as he studied the Boy Who Lived. His breathing was ragged and Dumbledore had the feeling that he was slouched forward on the desk as he was because of the great weight that was almost always pressing down on him.

“You didn’t make an appointment to see the Minister,” the raven-haired boy said, still not looking up.

Dumbledore smiled sadly. He should have known, after everything he had seen, that Harry had known he was here as soon as he arrived. “You seem tired, Harry,” Dumbledore commented idly.

Harry sat up and Dumbledore bit his tongue when he saw the red rims surrounding the boy's eyes, the salty tears still floating on the emeralds and the haggardness of his face. He was pale, seemed a bit thin, and struggling to put the hard mask on his face that the world saw.

"Have you come to take me back to your Order?" Harry asked, his voice neutral.

Dumbledore raised his palms towards the ceiling and shrugged. "If you wish it, Harry, we can go. Molly is beside herself with worry, as is Remus. When they hear of this... I fear they may think you have turned Dark....?"

There was a hint of a question in the last that Harry noted. He scowled and leaned back in his chair, looking now every inch the powerful figure he was. "I miss them," he said, surprising Dumbledore. "But I'm Light, Professor, and I always will be. No one has died today in this Ministry."

Dumbledore showed no reaction to that but Harry could tell he was immensely relieved. "The international backlash from this is going to be monumental," he said. "You will be declared an enemy of freedom, a world threat."

Harry laughed harshly. "So they'll condemn me, their *fucking* saviour, but they won't lift a finger against Voldemort. I don't know what world they think we're living in, Dumbledore, but I'm sort of an expert on that. Does the fact that I went out of my way not to harm anyone today mean nothing?"

Harry was trying very hard not to lose his temper. He grasped the arms of his chair hard, could feel and hear the leather stretching, and his voice trembled with anger.

Dumbledore shrugged. "John Rafter, the American Sorcerer who was so vocal during your display at the International Confederation." There was the twinkle in Dumbledore's eye when he mentioned that. "He is adamant in his protest against dragging the world into a conflict against the Dark Lord. You, on the other hand, have shown mercy – this will be

seen as weakness to kill by some, Harry, I'm afraid. It is just the way the world works."

"America...." Harry mumbled. "I'll be turning my attention there soon enough...."

Dumbledore sighed. "And what about us, Harry, the United Kingdom. Will you overthrow Arthur Weasley as well?"

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. His scar was burning – something he had yet to grow used to again. It itched now, more than burnt, but it would get worse. "I do..." he began. "I do what I have to do."

"Towards what end?"

"The end of a war."

The two men fell silent at that. Harry in his dark clothes, Dumbledore in his ever-vibrant robes. Two men who had and will change the world on opposite sides of a game board and yet working towards the same goal.

"I assume, Harry, it was you who removed the Grangers, and young Ron and Ginny from our protection. Again, Molly has been very upset with their disappearance."

Harry felt a pang of regret for that, but it would take a lot more to break him. If anything could break him this late in the Game.

"They're fine," was all he said about that.

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm relieved to hear it."

"Is there anything else, sir?" Harry asked, standing up and moving over to the frosted glass liquor cabinet against the wall. He poured himself a glass of something – he wasn't sure what – but it burnt his throat quite satisfactorily on the way down. "Drink?"

“No, thank you,” Dumbledore inclined his head. “I must confess, I did come here with the intent to bring you home.”

Harry didn't turn as he poured himself another glass of this amber liquid. It wasn't Firewhiskey, but it wasn't half bad. He remembered a drink on a world a handful of years ago that had damn near blinded him for a week. Good stuff if you didn't need to look into natural light for a few days.

“I expected as much,” Harry sighed. “I'm not going, Professor. This is my war now, and I'll fight it my own way.”

Dumbledore was hesitant for a moment. “Yes... yes, I see that.”

“Any other news from home?” he asked, returning to his seat.

Dumbledore nodded. “There has been an increase in Death Eater attacks all across the UK. We also believe that Voldemort is summoning Inperi to boost the number of his forces.”

Harry frowned. “I'm not familiar with Inperi....”

Dumbledore sighed. “They are re-animated corpses, Harry – the dead returned to a sham of existence to serve Voldemort. Our best estimate is that he has raised five dozen Muggle cemeteries in the last week alone. That is seven thousand Inperi – seven thousand mindless loyal soldiers. If you encounter one, know that their weakness is fire.”

As soon as Dumbledore began Harry had realised what Inperi were. He had encountered them before. Many times, in fact, but under different names. Zombies being the most prominent. The Undead another. The Living Dead, Axman, Fists, Scitars....

On one world, a powerful necromancer had summoned ten thousand corpses from a field of war and set them against Harry. He had destroyed them, but it was awful. The smell of decay was what he recalled the most about these creatures.

So Voldemort was commanding the dead now. This was a development, one that changed his plans. He needed an army himself, and fast. A force of Inferi could ravage continents if left unchecked. Especially a force this side, and there were plenty more recruits for the Dark Lord.

Bastard, Ethan breathed. *Although I don't know why I'm surprised. He used Inferi in my world, but was only strong enough to summon a few dozen.*

"There has also been a vigilante force combating Death Eaters and even a few Inferi," Dumbledore continued, raising his eyebrow questioningly.

Harry shook his head. "It wasn't me."

He recalled the article in the *Prophet* about a group of wizards and witches who had saved the life of a Wizengamot member. Maybe it would be in his interests to find these vigilantes... He could use more magical people to work on the crystals for his weapons.

"How are the Muggles reacting to the grave robbing?" Harry asked.

"Badly," Dumbledore sighed. "Arthur and the Muggle Prime Minister almost came to blows over it. Although something held the man back... I cannot imagine what. Our war is being hard to keep from the Muggles."

Harry made a mental note to see the Prime Minister before the week was out and explain what was happening, give him a report. He looked back up at Dumbledore and met his twinkling eyes stare for stare.

"I'm afraid I have to be getting on with today, sir," he said, making sure the dismissal was heard. Dumbledore rose calmly, but not before a shadow of displeasure had crossed his face. "I've..." Harry began. "I've enjoyed speaking with you again."

Dumbledore brightened and smiled warmly, like an elderly grandfather. He and Harry drew close near the fireplace and the old man put a hand on Harry's hard shoulder. "You've grown, my boy," he said, sighing yet

again. "I hope this will be the start of quite a few talks between you and I."

Harry didn't trust himself to say anything so he just inclined his head and watched Dumbledore leave in a blaze of green flames. Once he was gone, Harry sealed the fireplace. He would loose all his wards before leaving, and he was leaving within the hour, but first he had to write out a few orders for Steven Cornwall and the other Department Heads he now commanded.

Gathering a scroll of parchment and inking a quill, Harry set to work.

One Hour Later

Four hours had past since Harry had left his friends floating in his pensieve, and it was there he found them still when he returned back to his manor house with five of the six Twilight Guardian squads. He had left Foxtrot as a personal bodyguard for the acting-Minister Stephen Cornwall.

Harry ran his fingers gently through the misty memory in the pensieve basin before stepping into it. He found his friends once again huddled together, and saw himself kneeling protectively next to Ginny's body in the memory. He was atop of Slytherin Fortress, just about to kill Voldemort and have Ethan fused into his mind.

Silently, Harry did not approach his friends yet but watched himself step over to the lifeless body of Ginny from another world. His Ginny, the real one, looked extremely pale but was managing. The other Ron and Hermione had died a memory or two ago and they seemed to be coping better.

In the memory the sky was twilight, almost always at these critical moments the sky was twilight. Fate or whatever decreed it so.

"You see the price of defiance now, Harry," the Dark Lord Voldemort hissed in the memory. A weaker Voldemort – compared to the real one this man was a pale shadow.

Harry watched his face harden to something cold, made of stone, and he watched the silent tears fall from his eyes. He remembered thinking at the time that he would have nothing left to cry about after this.

But it was Voldemort, as always it was twilight it was also Voldemort. Harry had crossed worlds and universes and no matter, the most painful moments in his life were always brought back to the hand of Voldemort. He couldn't escape them; mayhap he was doomed never even to have the chance to.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!" Voldemort screeched.

The Memory Harry was kneeling on the ground, face pain warped and not looking up at the incoming curse. Ginny, the real Ginny, screamed, "HARRY!" just as he stood up.

In the blink of an eye, as the first cold tendrils of the curse began to buffet him, Harry was on his feet, glittering sword in hand and a scream of power issuing from his mouth. Inches away, the green light split as the long blade defied it and blue raw power surged up the length of the precious metal, setting the sword alight.

The shards of the Killing Curse streamed past him and some even went right through his friends in the memory. They were harmless, nothing but thought, but Ron tried to jump out of the way.

The four of them watched the Memory Harry grin insanely and they all saw the anger on his face as Voldemort and Ethan raised their wands to kill him.

"We're all going down together," Memory Harry smiled, and then pointed the blade towards the marble at his feet. With a cry of strength and of building power, he thrust the blade into the stone of the fortress.

Behind his friends, Harry silently mouthed the same words. Even now he thought he looked so innocent – nothing like what he had become. His friends, too engrossed in the memory, still had not noticed he was there.

“Get him, Harry,” Ron growled as the Memory Harry took a step forward, pulling the sword out of the stone as the entire fortress began to shake.

Ginny was crying, so was Hermione, as Harry thrust Ethan backwards with a wave of power and advanced on Voldemort.

"Die, you bastard," Harry growled, one moment before he thrust his flaming blade down into the Dark Lord's flesh - as he tried to get out of the way. There was a surge of power down the length of the blade, and then Voldemort exploded. One madman dead in a universe of madmen.

A few more moments went by in a haze of smoke and destruction, before Ethan crawled to his feet and spat, “Just die... POTTER!”

He charged at Harry, his hands balling into fists. Memory Harry saw him coming, clutching his wand so hard, and reacted mercilessly in the end. He rushed forward to meet Ethan, moving in a blur and impaling the Dark Lord's son upon the blade in his hand. Ethan screamed and an explosion of blood from his mouth covered Harry's face, as he drove him back against the wall - sword still in his stomach.

Fury and hate were replaced by confusion, a look of deep regret and, surprisingly, a gripping of his wand even harder than he already was. Memory

Harry reminded himself that they had killed Ginny, a defenceless girl whom he couldn't help but love, and didn't remove the sword.

"This game's over for you," Harry said, the foundations of the fortress shaking underneath his feet.

Ethan scowled, and then, unbelievably, he laughed. "It will never be over, Potter. Not for you...."

Ethan fired the Killing Curse and Harry watched his pure magic leap to his defence and battle the green light. They melded together, fused, and then exploded. Ethan was incinerated; Harry was thrown back with light tendrils of Ethan himself already embedding themselves into his mind, where they would stay right up to this very day.

Harry screamed when that happened and his friends screamed along with him. He remembered the pain well, as Memory Harry writhed on the ground and the fortress crumbled beneath him.

Falling to his knees, Memory Harry cried at the top of his lungs, "IT WILL NEVER BE OVER!"

At this point, the ground beneath Memory Harry exploded and the four real people followed his descent through the twilight sky to the ground below as the fabric of the time pocket was torn apart, ripped to shreds, burnt out of Existence.

"Oh Harry...." Ginny wept, on her knees with Hermione. Ron didn't know what to do. He just stared at the crumpling world in disbelief as it faded to black. This was all that Harry could remember and so the memory ended here. Harry approached his friends as he did, and got down onto his heels next to them.

"I think that's enough for today," he whispered. They looked up, tear stained eyes and all, but didn't seem too surprised to see him. They all nodded, all wanted to leave this nightmare.

Harry had to help Ginny to her feet, and she clung to him strongly when they left the pensieve, floating up and back into the real world. She still held him strongly when they fell onto the chairs near the coffee table that the pensieve rested upon. She was shaking, her breath was warm against his neck, and biting back on tears.

"We had no idea...." she whispered. "Oh, Harry, how could we? It's awful. How did you make it home? What... what..."

"It's okay," Harry whispered, putting his arm around her back and running his hand in small circles around her shoulder. "Hey, it was just a memory.

Nothing more now, over and done with."

Harry was not used to a person being so kind, so sensitive, so honest and innocent towards him. All of them had lost their innocence in certain ways, none more so than Harry, but at least his friends managed to hold on to a few tattered pieces.

"Just tell me...." Ginny whispered a few minutes later, when she had calmed down a bit. Her head was nestled into his shoulder, and Harry had been resting his cheek against her hair. He had almost fallen asleep right then, as tired as he was.

He noticed that Hermione was pushing Ron across the room, obviously to give the two of them a few moments alone.

"What?" he asked.

"Allarius," she whispered, her voice shaking. Sniffing, Ginny continued, "Did you... do you meet him again?"

Ginny felt every muscle in Harry's body tense at the question and that was her answer. She sighed, put her hand on his chest to feel his heartbeat and listened quietly as he spoke...

"Ginny," he began. His voice was softer than she had been used to in the last few weeks. More like the Harry she had known before all of this had happened. "The memories in the pensieve they... they get a whole lot worse before they get better. There are wars, death, destruction, chaos... It took me a long time to get home, to get back here." Nervously, he added, "To you."

"How long?" she whispered.

“Too long,” Harry dodged the question. She would have to see for herself. “Anyway, Allarius does some pretty terrible things before I kill him... a lot of terrible things, actually. I put those memories in there because you’re strong enough to see them. Just know that what I did... in getting back here, home... fixed it all in all the worlds. I undid the damage.”

Ginny was quiet for a moment. “I trust you, Harry,” she said eventually.

“I never doubted that,” Harry replied.

She sniffed again, but it seemed it was for the last time as she sat up and let him go, only to snuggle in closer again a moment later, draping one of her long legs over his. “What’re we going to do with ourselves, Harry?” she asked him a moment later, tiredly. Her arms were wrapped around him, once again her head rested in the groove of his shoulder.

“How do you mean?” he asked, putting one of his arms around her, the other on her leg. He was slowing falling asleep, like that. He could sleep for hours just like that, with Ginny’s comforting weight alongside.

“I mean I know pretty soon the war is going to start getting serious again, and I know you’ll be in the thick of it...” She sounded close to tears again at that. “But we rarely have time together, you and I. Five minutes here and there isn’t enough... It doesn’t....” She was struggling for words. “It doesn’t... feel right.”

Harry blinked and really thought about that. He had learnt to trust his instincts a long time ago and right now they were sending him plenty of warning signals. “I’m not sure I understand—”

“I think,” Ginny went on hurriedly. “That something bad will happen if we don’t stay together. I really feel that way, Harry, I do. I’ve even had nightmares of you dying... more than usual... when I’m not there. I don’t... I just....”

The sun, the warm Australian sun, filtered in through the window as it

swam across the sky. The beams highlighted the dust particles in the air and Harry felt warm basking in it next to Ginny. A strange silence fell on their world, the two of them there, and for all Harry knew they were the only two people on the planet. If they were, he would not have cared.

"Then I guess...." he said after the long moment. "Then I guess we'll have to stick together then."

They fell asleep together there, and were undisturbed until the world descended into twilight. Harry Potter, the Hero of the Light, and Ginevra Weasley, the one being in all of Existence capable of breaking the Darkslayer. For she held his heart in her hands, they both knew it, and that scared Harry.

Not because he did not trust her – there was no one else he trusted or *loved* more. But he feared what his enemies would do to her when they knew that. If she were to die... Harry would fall, Existence would be denied and Creation damned.

It would be the end of everything, all for the love of her. A dangerous gamble, for love, but one Harry would never sacrifice.

Chapter 13 – A Greater War

Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

~~Strode

July

1st,

1997

Thirteen Death Eaters lined the floor of the courtrooms beneath the Australian Ministry of Magic. Courtrooms that had not been used for

decades, since capital punishment had been abolished. Lucky thirteen. These Death Eaters were spies, secretly working against their Ministry for Voldemort's gain. They were not high in his standing, but each had done their part to ensure their Lord's victory.

Under the truth serum, each one had confessed to torture and murder, and in three of the eight men, rape. Crimes enough to damn them here, now, as they knelt before Harry Potter with their hands secured tightly behind their backs with invisible bonds of magic.

Over the last five days the Australian Ministry had interrogated all of its personnel – those who hadn't fled in time, anyway – and had uncovered thirteen Death Eaters, thirteen Marked Death Eaters, as well as seventy two Death Eater sympathisers and dark wizards. Those latter two were either fired or serving prison sentences.

The punishment for being branded with the Mark though was death, and would be death until the war was over. It was a hard choice, one that added to Harry's feelings of guilt and pain, but one he had to make for the greater good – if there was such a thing in these matters.

The thirteen Death Eaters were in varying states of distress and, in a few cases, anger and calm. Eight of them were shaking, knowing their deaths were at hand, whilst three glared unblinking at Harry, and the remaining two just knelt tall, neither moving nor meeting eyes with anyone. Shock had claimed those two.

All of them, after their confessions under truth serum, had been immediately silenced, unable to communicate any longer. Stephen Cornwall, the acting Minister, had ensured one more question was asked before they were silenced.

If given a choice now, who would you serve, which side would you choose?

Under the truth serum they could not lie, could not even think of lying. All thirteen had said that they would flock to Voldemort, and that alone ensured their deaths. It was a dirty, sad business. One that was not exactly in accordance with the Light, but then nothing truly could be.

Besides the thirteen condemned prisoners, there were a handful of other people in the room. Four executioners, who were being paid three hundred galleons for every Death Eater they... took care of. Greed, gold, could make people do anything. A series of witnesses from within the Ministry, namely department heads, and on the high bench were Harry, Stephen Cornwall and a bunch of frightened aides.

The four executioners stood unmoving, faces hooded, behind the thirteen prisoners. Harry nodded, just once, and with only hesitating an instant and the four men moved behind the first four Death Eaters.

Harry grit his teeth as he watched this, knowing it was necessary – that nothing could prevent the coming maelstrom of death and fire except total willingness to do what had to be done. He'd pay hell for it, but his life was a small price to pay for the future of this world.

The last five days had shot by quickly in a blur of pensieve memory, international anger, assassination attempts, rebellion, and little sleep. As expected, the International Confederation was outraged, appalled, and frightened out of their wits. It seemed Harry was making good on his threat, and had dispatched of one Ministry with pitiful ease.

Rebellion.

Although it slowed him down, Harry actually felt respect for those Australians within the Ministry who had declared him an enemy of freedom, of the right to choice and life. They had formed a sort of separatist government in an unknown location, supported by, Harry suspected, John Rafter – the American with influence over their Minister. It was heartening to know that, even after all he'd done, some people – some humans – still had the strength to stand by their convictions, to stand against him. It gave him hope that the human race, if it survived what was coming, would do alright in the long run.

That said, they were enemies, and Harry had had their positions revoked, declared them rebels to be imprisoned, offered a thousand galleons to anyone with information leading to them, and seized their Gringotts accounts. It was unfortunate, as they did have families, but he could not afford betrayal and rebellion. Could not!

By God, it hurt to do though, and so far he had kept it from Ron, Hermione and Ginny. It wouldn't keep, and he felt they may abandon him for it, but as long as they lived there would be time later for forgiveness. If he deserved it.... There was also the small chance that they'd understand why he had done what he had done, but it was small.

But right now Harry did not allow himself to feel that, or think about it any longer. He nodded once, and in so doing sealed the fates of thirteen people, thirteen human beings. The four white-hooded executioners, faces hidden in shadow, raised their wands. Even though magic prevent the prisoners from moving, Harry could feel the majority of them struggling to.

Except for three, two women and one man. They never broke eye contact with him, and their smiles remained until they died. Arrogance, superiority and the unchangeable belief that he was damned for this was on their faces. Their lord, Voldemort, would burn him for this. Retribution would be swift.

Personally, Harry didn't think Voldemort would overly care about losing these followers, but soon enough his losses would amount up to something worth taking note of. Then the world would feel the wrath of the Dark Lord once again. Unless Harry was there to stop him....

"Vestic!"

Thirteen Dark Marks – thirteen deaths.

The executioners had just earned themselves six hundred galleons, one nine hundred, and the world had to survive with thirteen less Death Eaters.

When it was done, Harry felt nothing really. He knew he'd just killed thirteen people – sent them beyond this world and probably into eternal damnation for their crimes, but it didn't matter. That scared him – it did.

You have to find yourself again, Harry, Ethan said unexpectedly. *You're too... detached.*

Killing the dark wizards was only half of the executioner's job. Body bags had been provided and they were to be taken by Portkey to a

crematorium. Their deaths would be announced in the newspaper to make sure Voldemort heard of it, and Harry had made it known worldwide over the last five days that any Death Eaters found in territory he controlled were to be put to death.

“Well, I don’t know what we’ve started today,” Stephen Cornwall whispered next to Harry. “But we’re no longer on the sidelines of this war....”

“There are no lines in this war,” Harry said absently, still thinking about his lack of feeling over death. “Except the one between myself and Voldemort. Other than that this world is one huge battlefield.”

Cornwall nodded and let the moment stretch on before saying, “What are your orders, Minister?”

Harry inwardly groaned at the title – hating what he had done to this country – but answered nevertheless. “Continue training new Aurors, triple their pay rate to increase numbers. Conduct random searches for Death Eaters in the Ministry, and inform me if a foreign force enters the Ministry – they haven’t yet, but they will.”

Cornwall nodded. He looked troubled but he nodded.

Taking a final look at his now dead enemies, Harry disappeared silently. There was still too much to do, and he felt slightly sick. His stomach churned – something was on the horizon. It was his sense... part of the Darkslayer curse. Something big was about to happen.

The world materialised as the kitchen of his house on the southern coast of Australia. It was an hour earlier here than it had been in Canberra, and Harry saw Ginny enjoying her breakfast at the table. She was alone – Harry had been longer than he thought he would be at the Ministry.

“Where’ve you been?” she asked, motioning him over to the seat next to her. “I was getting worried.”

Harry sighed. “Just taking care of business,” he said. “Sorry. I was longer than I thought.”

Ron and Hermione were not here. They had gone to the Gold Coast and

the Great Barrier Reef for a few days as part of their planned and paid for holiday. Hermione felt obliged to go, and Harry had sent Ron with her for protection. He'd probably need it from her if anything happened though.

Ginny had decided to stay. She did not want to leave him alone.

Ginny nodded, pursing her lips and glancing down at her cereal. "What do you want to do today?" she asked.

Harry opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off.

"And don't tell me you've got to go save the world!" she exclaimed, waving her spoon under his nose. "You can take a few hours off."

Harry closed his mouth and smiled. "I was about to say," he said. "How about we go for a walk on the beach... I need to tell you a few things that I've been holding back."

The sun wasn't high in the eastern sky when Harry and Ginny set off down the beach hand in hand. It was the pale light after dawn that lit their way, that glittered off the large endless expanse of the tranquil blue ocean. There was a reef about half a mile out, and that caught all the waves, leaving this little bay calm and peaceful.

Shoeless, Ginny and Harry walked in the swash of the tide towards the sun. It was a cloudless day and, despite the early hour, already quite warm.

"So..." Ginny said, once they had walked in companionable silence long enough. "What did you want to tell me?"

Harry didn't quite know how to phrase it, so he just said it. "I'm the Australian Minister of Magic."

First Ginny smiled, laughed simperingly, but then frowned. "You're serious!?"

Harry shrugged. "The Twilight Guardians – the Muggle soldiers – and I, Apparated to the Ministry whilst you and Ron and Hermione were in the pensieve. We took it over and I forced the previous Minister out of his job."

“Why?” Ginny whispered. “I didn’t really believe what the papers said you said at the International Confederation!”

Harry chuckled. “That was fairly accurate, for once. I... em... I did it to save the world.”

Ginny sighed and walked a few steps ahead, letting go of his hand. “Yeah, it seems we always come back to that. Did you hurt anyone in this *takeover*?”

It had been a long time since anyone had actually openly faced Harry with anger on their face, anyone on his side that is. At that moment he realised just how... powerful... he was. The whole damn world feared him – he did not have to do much to change that. But it hurt when it was Ginny.

“No one died,” he told her. “And I’ve added four hundred Aurors to the army I’ll lead against Voldemort.”

Ginny paled and shivered despite the heat. “You seem so hard, Harry,” she said sadly. “I know what happened to you was awful, terrible, but you can’t have forgotten what it was like before that....”

They had taken a break over the last few days from the pensieve memories. Currently they stood in the world where he had met Tarishma and faced Allarius’ demon army with a human army of his own. Almost up to the battle that had destroyed a universe, torn it apart.

In all honesty, Harry found it *very* hard to remember who he had been before the time travel and universe jumping. He wasn’t that person anymore, and couldn’t be, really. God above, he had just calmly killed thirteen people.... thirteen *enemies*.

Who was he to decide that they had to die? What made him so special? Why, in all the life in all the universes was he chosen to be the godforsaken Darkslayer? It was tearing him apart, burning his soul in the blood of the dead. And there was an ocean of that. So many years, so many fights against power hungry madmen who dealt in the powers of the universe and believed themselves invincible.

Had he become one of them? Was the fact that he questioned it sign

enough that he hadn't? Or was he walking the line, edging on both sides of it, swaying left and right. Would he, sooner or later, burn that line and piss on the ashes? This world was doomed if he did... and it seemed there was nothing he could do about it.

"I sentenced thirteen Death Eaters to death this morning, Ginny, and any other Death Eater found operating in Australia. No excuse – they take a truth potion and confess and then die. I... I felt nothing when I did it... Does that make me a monster?"

Ginny was silent for a long time, a long time, and she stared at him with an unreadable, unblinking face. Harry found himself unable to meet her eyes and knew his face was a mask of pain and anguish, both physical and mental. For some reason it felt as though a lot more than mere happiness rested on her response to that question.

When Ginny still did not say anything, Harry continued.

"I'm sorry...." he said, croaked, his voice was hoarse. "I try... I *tried* to tell them, to tell them all at the IC... they wouldn't listen.... so many people are going to die... I'm doing what I, what I think is right for the innocent...."

Harry's cheeks were wet with tears, tears he did not know he still possessed. A moment later Ginny's hands closed over his cheeks and gently wiped the tears away. She lifted his face to meet her eyes.

"You do," she began, "what you have to do, Harry.... and I'll be there to keep your feet on the ground, to... to save you from yourself. You're only human, Harry, no matter how much has changed. You can cry, you can bleed... you can *feel*. You are *not* a monster – you're a hero."

Harry nodded, for lack of anything else to do. "Where are we now, Gin?" he asked despondently. "*When* are we? I've seen and done so much that at times I just want to lie down and die. What do you think will happen in the end?"

Ginny managed a small smile. "It'll get better, you'll stop Voldemort, and we can forget all about this – you can move on."

Harry shook his head and sniffed. "There's more to it than that, I'm afraid," he sighed, looking out over the ocean and the small waves crashing against the reef half a mile offshore.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked him, putting her arm across his shoulders.

"There's a war going on...."

Ginny blinked. "Yes...."

"A greater war than the one I'm fighting against Voldemort, Gin, a war for Creation itself."

Ginny stared into his eyes with a small frown. "I don't... don't understand."

"Neither do I," Harry whispered, eyes stressed and voice riddled with inner pain. "Allarius once told me it would never be over.... I think he was right."

Ginny paled at the mention of the demon. She had seen him in a memory only, and yet felt more than awe and admiration for Harry, who had remained strong against that monster in real life. Had fought him in more than one way, on more than one world. It was incredible. Harry was made of stronger stuff than she could ever hope to be.

Still, it did seem that no matter what he did something evil was always there to challenge him again, to try and destroy the world (worlds) and each time it got harder for him to hold onto himself, his soul. He had lost so much and, in the end, had really gained so little.

Ginny knew he was a hero. One of the last heroes in all of existence, for all she knew. The last power of reason and justness in a universe of uncertain evil and blind selfishness. Countless billions owed their lives to Harry, owed him their thanks, and these people never even knew his name, the pain he went through, the things he sacrificed.

His family, more than once, and his friends. As morbid as it was, Ginny had noticed over the years that Harry was always the survivor. Everyone could die around him and he'd figure out a way to survive, to live on, to

move on, to continue to be. It wasn't necessarily a good thing – especially when the dead were counted.

But, at this stage of his life, she was really all he had. Ron and Hermione were there as well, but they had each other as much as they had Harry. It was her, and she knew it. Somehow, somehow, the future for Harry had fallen to her. He was self-destructive, took risks that he could not afford to. Somehow she needed to remind him he was the Boy Who Lived. *LIVED!*

“Listen to me, Harry,” Ginny said, pulling him close. He seemed so light, despite the muscles that rippled across his body... most of it scarred. “You just listen now. It will be over, d’you hear me? I’m telling you that one day it can end, you’ll end it – no one can stop you from doing that, no one who has tried so far has lived, Harry, save Voldemort – and you’ll get him.”

Harry chuckled mirthlessly.

“Who are you going to believe?” she asked. “Me or Allarius?”

For one terrible moment Ginny could see him wavering towards Allarius, could see it in how his already dim eyes seemed to die, but then he frowned. His care worn forehead, with that infamous scar, crinkled down into a frown and, just like that, the fight came back into Harry’s eyes. They sparkled in the early morning sunlight, sparkled enough to set the world on fire.

“Thank you, Gin,” he said, open honesty painted in his eyes. “For a m—”

Suddenly Harry lurched forward, as if someone had punched him in the stomach, and his eyes bulged. Ginny saw he was holding his stomach. He glanced at her once, briefly, and then spun in the sand until he was facing north, looking up into the sky.

“Harry,” Ginny said, her voice laced with concern. “What’s the matter?”

Harry didn’t seem to hear her. “Oh.... you stupid bastard,” he mumbled. The sparkle in his eyes died and they become as hard as stone. He clenched his fists. “So be it then... Gin, get back in the house and stay there.”

Ginny shook her head fiercely and stepped forward. “No, wai—”

Harry disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving Ginny alone on the empty beach.

Stonehenge

A few minutes before midnight

It had all truly begun here, one year ago. It was here that the secret to breaking Potter’s blood magic was uncovered; here the words that opened a gateway between worlds had been found. It was here that had led Lord Voldemort to become the strongest wizard on the planet.

Not a wizard, Voldemort thought. I am a god.

He was alone amongst the ancient stones with nothing save an old book in his hand. His eyes illuminated the inside of his hood with a pale red light, and some of that light spilled out onto the pages of the ragged text in his hands. The night was cloudless, and yet the stars offered no light here. All light was sucked into the whirling vortex of darkness that shrouded the Dark Lord forevermore.

The tome he held was a book his Death Eaters had recovered a year ago in a pyramid at Giza, in Egypt. Several thousand years old, it was quite possibly the oldest book on the planet. Voldemort idly flipped through the pages, a preserving charm keeping the text whole.

The ground froze on this summer night, just from the presence of his aura. A black rippling mass that crackled red, burnt life and destroyed hope. There was no will in this world strong enough to combat that.

Alongside the book, Voldemort also had a small slip of parchment with the Darkslayer prophecy written upon it, translated from a book not quite as old as the one he held. Potter’s prophecy... that boy was a pawn of Fate, of Destiny. He had wasted his potential following the Light, especially when his defeat had been Seen over five thousand years ago.

Finding the page he wanted, Voldemort quickly translated the text and compared it to what he had learnt from the prophecy and what he knew

of the stones. Here... now... he could safely open a gateway, like he had done at Hogwarts, and call forth an army to destroy this world.

Thousands of demons, thousands of Inferi, and thousands of Death Eaters. The Inferi alone could win him this war... so long as Potter was destroyed.

With a flick of his wrist the book disappeared up the sleeve of his robes, and an instant later his hands shuddered with pulsing red light, before exploding with the same light and encasing his arms up to his elbows.

Flowing in pure, raw power Voldemort had never felt more alive. With a wave of his hand he could wipe London off the map from where he stood... but Potter would feel it, and his location was still unknown. It wasn't yet time to test his strength against young Potter's. Uncertainty made him cautious.

It was then, as the hour struck midnight, that Voldemort uttered the words that had changed the world before....

"Tempus ac Capacitas!"

Outside of this circle of stones, those words would only work in the world on one of the equinoxes. But here... in this ancient circle of power....

The sky tore open in the centre of the stones, above the altar, and ripped down into that sacrificial stone, splitting it through the middle. It spun, flaring red on its edges until it formed a jagged seething circle of darkness, framed crimson in the air.

The stones were a buffer that kept a leash on the destructive capabilities of the hole. Inside here it could be safely used.

Debris, stone, and dirt flew into the growing vortex as Voldemort stretched his consciousness out towards the gateway; towards the gateway into what he believed was the Boundary. Almost immediately he felt something brush his mind in response, and a black bulge began to seep out of the vortex and onto the ground at Stonehenge.

The wind howled across the land, the stars seemed to die and the moon fail. The only light was from the tops of the sentinels of the circle, from

the stones. Each of them was glowing with an ethereal blue light.

The creature, whatever it was, slowly rose and took form in front of the Dark Lord. It did not look like a demon, or what Voldemort had imagined a demon would look like. It was a shadow, really, it looked like a shadow. Dark with yellow slits for eyes, the air shimmered as it moved forward.

“What are you?” Voldemort hissed, his breath freezing the air.

The creature laughed, low and nasally. “I am the Destroyer....”

“Destroyer?” Voldemort scoffed.

“One of many, a part of a whole,” the creature whispered smoothly. “Why have you willingly opened the Boundary into this world?”

Voldemort straightened. He could feel the evil in this creature – its entire existence was evil, pain and destruction. It was a destroyer. “I have come to summon the demons from the space between universes,” Voldemort answered the creature.

The shadow laughed again, mockingly. “And why would you want that....?”

Voldemort held his patience, but only just. His palms shone red, itching to kill this creature. “So I may destroy this world, and kill my greatest enemy!”

“A powerful foe, this enemy must be,” the creature hissed, moving on the air in a hazy fuzz of despair. “To stand against your power.”

“He is the Darkslayer,” Voldemort replied.

To the Dark Lord’s surprise the creature recoiled and then screeched such an unholy sound that the stone at his feet quivered and cracked. It screamed out into the night, into the world. It was a scream of anger, of pain... and of fear. This creature, this Destroyer, knew and feared Potter.

In its fury and fear the creature managed to speak. “The Darkslayer... he is upon this world?”

“He is,” Voldemort nodded. “Here he is known as Harry Potter.”

That name got the same response as Darkslayer.

Harry Apparated to England and appeared in the dead of night, in those magical few moments when one day ends and another begins at midnight. His Darkslayer sense, the ability to sense great evil and powerful magic, had punched him hard in the gut and told him that something powerfully evil was afoot.

And arriving here now he could see what it was.

Voldemort, of course. Who else would it be?

The Dark Lord, the source of all the wrong in the world, stood before a familiar looking hole in the air, one that led into the Boundary – and from there anywhere in existence – and before that tear was a creature of darkness, of misery... a fitting companion for Voldemort.

Harry had never met a Destroyer. Whilst he was scouring thousands of worlds for the Ways of Twilight, the Destroyers had pulled their strings from behind the scenes and never openly interacted with him. From his dreams though, a nightly insight into existence, he knew that they were waging a war against the Guardians for supreme dominance of the Boundary.

And if they controlled the Boundary, then the Stream was theirs... which ultimately meant they controlled Existence as a whole, through all of time. A problem, Harry supposed, for everything that was not a Destroyer.

Hidden in the darkness behind one of the ancient stones, which were flared blue on their heads, Harry strained his ears to hear what his enemies were saying. He had to kneel down and cover his ears when the Destroyer uttered a screech so loud that the ground shook.

Once it had died down, Harry grinned when he realised that he was the topic of conversation.

From where he knelt he could hear the two evil beings clearly.

“Darkslayer....” the Destroyer wept, cursed, raged. “He is human?”

Voldemort laughed, low and vicious. “What else would he be, creature?”

The Destroyer hissed.... “A mere human could not have defeated Evil itself... he is thought by many to be an Immortal. The Darkslayer could only be a god.”

“He is human,” Voldemort replied. “Mortal, and frustratingly powerful.”

The creature whimpered. “Yesssss...” it hissed. “Powerful.”

Harry found himself biting his bottom lip with indecision. So much rested on the edge of a knife now, on the flip of a coin, that it was unbelievable. Voldemort had given him the perfect opportunity to kill him. He himself had left Slytherin Fortress, and in so doing made himself vulnerable. He could attack now, pit his power against the Dark Lord, and kill the monster... maybe.

Equal in power, equal in strength, Harry was the one with more experience using this awesome magic they both possessed. He had been using it for over one hundred years, after all, but what damage would be caused if they did fight? Too much... less than if they didn't in the long run.

For a few minutes Harry was lost in his thoughts. When he heard Voldemort speak again it was with the Destroyer, and they said something quite interesting – something that made Harry's choice for him.

“The Destroyers will swear allegiance to you, Dark Lord,” the shadow creature whispered on the night air. “We will release the demons to your command; we will scour this world for the Darkslayer.”

Harry couldn't see Voldemort, not and stay hidden, but he felt as if he could sense the happiness his enemy felt at that moment. And, he realised, he could. His scar prickled and he quivered with an emotion of... anticipation, joy... that wasn't his own. Still, he also felt a surge of patient fury that was his.

This could not happen! Not here, not on his own world. *Rather a billion*

other worlds fall to the Destroyers than they bring their terrible war here.

Kill them! Ethan exclaimed. *You have no choice now. Do or die, Potter!*

Harry agreed, but he would listen a little longer.

"These demons...." Voldemort continued. "What do they number?"

"Thousands," the Destroyer hissed, edging around the spinning vortex of reality. "Hundreds of thousands. The Darkslayer defeated them in the mortal worlds once before, but with his quest for Twilight they were remade earlier in the Stream. He destroyed them, and created them."

Voldemort nodded. "And your race, the Destroyer army? How many are you?"

"We are infinite," the shadow replied truthfully. "Billions upon billions spread across all of Existence, locked in a war for control of Time and Space."

Voldemort had not moved an inch since the circle in the air had been torn open. The ground seemed to bleed beneath his feet, dying and withering. There were also shoots, the beginnings of black roses, growing out of the earth beneath the misty feet of the shadow creature.

"And yet you fear Harry Potter," the Dark Lord spoke to the Destroyer, both still unaware that Harry himself was less than forty feet away.

The creature recoiled as if struck, bending in the light there was and fading into the darkness before screeching, much like a Dementor, and draining the warmth out of the surrounding air.

"You cannot understand, mortal!" it hissed. "He destroyed us all, destroyed Evil itself. He struck a blow that we only recovered from because of his use of Twilight!"

It was Harry's turn to recoil as if struck. And, physically, he felt as if someone had just hit him in the stomach with a sledgehammer. *NO!* his mind screamed. *NOOOO!* Ethan was wailing something inaudible, but Harry's ears were throbbing. It couldn't be... it shouldn't be... it... it... it... it made perfect sense....

Allarius – a manifestation of the Destroyers, of the opposite of Light, of Good. Everything has an opposite, that was unchangeable. Allarius – had been destroyed, annihilated, on a mortal world, a world that *had* to obey the law of time. *Had to, unavoidable!*

And, by God, Harry had changed time at the Ways of Twilight. He had recreated evil, changed the pattern of Time, the canvas of Existence and the order of Life. He had, to return home to his friends, started a war that had decimated the Boundary and many millions of mortal worlds and other planes of reality.

In the end he had not saved Existence at all, but doomed it to repeat its misery... only slower. Instead of quick titanic destruction it would be a slow, pointless decay of life and Light.

Merlin, he was supposed to be the Darkslayer – a destroyer of darkness. And now, like one of Time's biggest jokes, it had just become clear that he had created an army, given it strength. An Army of Darkness, hell bent on bringing about the End of Creation.

"What is this Twilight you speak of?" Voldemort asked. Harry did not know how much of the conversation he had missed, and even now his head was still spinning, but that is what he heard next.

"Twilight...." the Destroyer whispered. "Twilight, Twilight, Twilight... you call it Magic."

"Magic," scoffed Voldemort.

"True magic," the creature continued. "First Magic, the Magic – the Twilight, that controls... everything!"

It suddenly became very clear to Harry that Voldemort was learning too much. Their power was equal... for everything he had done over the years, Voldemort could do the opposite. God, he could even change time and end this reality. There was too much left to chance, to choice.

Someone had to die; someone had to end the madness....

"This power will be mine!" Voldemort exclaimed.

It was then, in a quiet rage, that Harry stepped out from behind the glowing blue stone and into the clearing. As he passed across the stone he felt a slight resistance from the power in the air, but no more than that. He spoke, quite calmly, to Lord Voldemort as he walked.

“That *power* you speak of, Tom,” he said bitterly. “That power belongs to no one!”

The Dark Lord turned with the same calm that Harry showed, a slow grin spreading across his skeletal face. It was as if he had been expecting him, and, Harry thought, he may have been. Voldemort would have had to have known that he would sense the magic of the gateway.

“Potter,” Voldemort inclined his head. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

The shadow creature, the soldier of the Destroyers, wailed and stepped backwards towards the vortex and the gateway into the Boundary. Once inside of it, the creature could be a trillion miles away in a heartbeat, not even a single footstep on the path of existence.

“Distance won’t save you,” Harry growled at the creature. “This world is barred to you and your kind.”

Harry raised his left palm and fired a wave of pulsating energy, tinged blue, at the monster. It screeched when it hit and was blasted of its misty feet back into the vortex. It hit the spinning edge and was cut clean in two. Its lower half was smeared across the altar beneath the vortex, whilst its upper half died trillions of miles away lost in the war torn regions of the Boundary.

“You are playing with forces beyond your understanding, Voldemort,” Harry turned his attention onto the Dark Lord. His eyes were hard, his voice frost. Kings and Queens, demons and madmen, evil had trembled under that voice.

“And you are scrounging for power as a mere Minister,” Voldemort spat. “You could be so much more, have so much more! The humans beneath us are weak, worse than useless!”

Harry grinned. “The future of Existence relies solely on the human race,

of which you are a member – however long ago that was.”

“I am immortal, Potter!” Voldemort raged, stepping forward and slicing his white hand down through the air. It seemed to shimmer and waver, as if about to shatter. The vortex still spun slowly. “More than human! You, on the other hand, are nothing more than a fool....”

Harry laughed and took a long step to his left, clenching his fists. “Oh, Voldie,” he sighed. “You’re not upset because I’m more feared across time and space than you will ever be, are you?”

Voldemort’s arms, cloaked in black, exploded with crimson power, crackling across his eyes and enveloping his hands. A fraction of a second later and Harry’s were the same, only lightning blue. The vortex to eternity suddenly collapsed and snapped closed, sealing the air whole once again – as it should always be.

“There’s only power now, Potter, only power and death. When will the cost of this game destroy you?”

Harry shook his head. “This *game*, the game... the cost has always been too high, Tom. You never did realise that....”

Voldemort hissed and sent an arc of sizzling hot power coursing through the air and the space between them. Harry flicked his wrist and the crimson bolt was deflected upwards into the sky. It exploded two miles up, one second later, and for a moment lit up the night red.

“Okay then,” Harry sighed, and struck back with his own strength. Crossing his arms he threw them down and a wave of blue power, strong enough to devastate a continent surged towards Voldemort.

Voldemort parried it with one of his own, red and just as powerful and they met in the middle, spinning and slipping together – both fighting for dominance, both commanding respect and fear. Sweat broke out immediately on Harry’s brow as soon as he threw his power into the Dark Lord’s.

Never, in all the years, had he faced an opponent so strong. Allarius came close... but there was something more intimate about it being

Voldemort. They were life long enemies, after all, and equal in strength down to the last drop of power. Damn the scar link for what it had done.

The pressure steadily increased, it skyrocketed, and the compression of the air became so much from the roaring power that Harry struggled to breathe. He couldn't see Voldemort, shrouded as they were in power, but he could feel him. Like a dark blight on what remained of his tattered soul there was Voldemort, seething and corrupted. The exact opposite of all that Harry could be.

The two waves of power became one and neither Harry nor Voldemort had moved an inch. This was more a battle of the minds, of wills, but also of strength. Harry had the greater experience with this force that governed the universe, and as such he knew a few tricks....

He split his power, right down the middle and immediately began to lose ground on Voldemort as the crimson light slithered closer, now only battling against half of Harry's strength. With the other half though, Harry sent a beam of light up into the sky where it arced in the night, glittering almost twilight, and pounded into the top of Voldemort's beam.

It shattered.

Millions of shards of blue and red light glittered away into the night and Voldemort stumbled back, howling with pain. Harry gritted his teeth as the countryside for miles around was annihilated from the shards of raw magic propelling themselves for miles in every direction. A rain of red and blue light to set the world on fire.

Forests melted, small towns nearby were washed away in a heartbeat and nothing living survived. A few hundred humans died, casualties of war.

The ancient stones of Stonehenge, although hit with a titanic force of power, did not break nor show any sign of weakening. They seemed to sing with the power, and flared either blue or red depending on what shard hit them. The power spread from stone to stone, and arcs of light, again red and blue, moved from one stone to the next, creating a crisscrossing fence that sealed Voldemort and Harry inside of the circle.

The fence spun through the stones, faster and faster until it was a blur of colours. Harry felt something big building up and for a moment took his attention from the staggering Dark Lord. That almost killed him as a bolt of red light, travelling faster than a bullet, hammered into his shoulder, the old scarred one.

Cursing his own stupidity, and fighting the pain, Harry spun backwards in a series of flips and hit the spinning fence of magic the stones had created. Immediately he was caught in the flow and began to scream as dizziness swept over him. Everything was lost – Voldemort, Stonehenge and his sense of power. Spinning, spinning, spinning....

He threw up... maybe... it was hard to tell. On the edge of his senses he was aware that a white light had surrounded him, sustaining him. Keeping him alive, a thin shield, as he was propelled round and round at the speed of light.

Something told him he was no longer at Stonehenge, but had been transported elsewhere – perhaps to another world or a different reality of his own world. All he knew was that he wanted it to stop, wanted to go home to Ginny. It had been foolish to challenge Voldemort, what had he been thinking?

His shoulder ached with all the pain of Voldemort's power. Stinging, biting, sizzling. He managed to turn his head down and saw that most of his shirt and cloak had been burnt away around the area and that it was bleeding quite profusely.

Time became lost, forgotten, as it always seemed to be in these things. Hours could have been minutes and minutes days – it was all relative. All he could see were spinning colours, a maelstrom of them, bearing down around him in this place.

And then it was all white – just white. No longer could Harry tell if he was moving as there were no spinning colours, no points of reference, just white. He hung on nothing, could still have been travelling at light speed, but it was impossible to discern. He didn't feel as if he was moving.

"You are not supposed to be here."

Lazily, not really caring what happened next, Harry turned to search for the voice. It sounded female, mature and infinitely sad and caring. "Who are you?" he asked, the pain in his shoulder forgotten. If there was one thing Harry could do it was forget pain. He'd long since grown accustomed to the burning of his nerves.

"One who cares, Darkslayer – you are not supposed to be here yet."

Harry sighed. "Where is here?"

"The thin layer between life and death," the voice replied calmly, almost musically. "You stand outside of death for now and yet too much will be lost should you die before the war for creation is fought and decided."

Harry shook his head. "I... don't want to die," he said honestly. "But I am so tired of war...."

"You carry more than one soul to this place, this waypoint of twilight." The voice now sounded troubled. "One is of great evil... another of Light... what right do you have to decide their deaths?"

Harry had no idea what she (it?) was talking about.

And, come to think of it, he did not really care.

So he had found another piece of existence he wasn't supposed to see, what did it matter? He could destroy it all, save it all, rule it all but for what? What did it matter? He'd broken another rule or two laid down by a Creator who had long since abandoned his creation, or died for it. None of it was of any importance to Harry, none of it.

All that he cared for was Ginny, and Ron and Hermione, but mostly for Ginny. That, above all else, was his only and greatest concern. This could all burn and he would set the fire if it gave him and Ginny a chance at peace.

"How do I return home?" he asked the whiteness.

There was no response, and Harry had the feeling that he was alone now, bereft and left floating in this nothingness between life and death, the thin line that separated souls from one world and the next.

Bugger, he thought. *I won't die here....*

Still alive, still *human*, Harry called his power into his palms. The blue light flared in stark contrast to the white of this place.

“Stop! You mustn't disturb the balance anymore.”

The voice echoed and reverberated across millions of miles, through Harry's mind and throughout his consciousness. He ignored it and continued.

Over the years, the long years, Harry had seen enough of how it was done to create a gateway between worlds. Between worlds, yes, but between different realms of time and existence was another matter. The three magic words were *tempus ac capacitas*, but somehow that didn't seem enough here.

Harry trusted his instincts as he began to flow and weave magic in the space before him. It formed a net, an intricate shape of threads so fine that they would snap in the smallest breeze. The air began to shimmer, to melt and transform. The fabric of this place was much the same as everywhere else – its foundations were the same, and this allowed Harry to tunnel a way through it.

His gateway opened upon a familiar looking beach in Australia, late in the morning, and his headquarters was visible shining in the sun. Floating forward, Harry encountered a minor amount of resistance as he broke through this realm and back into his mortal one. He snapped the thin layer separating them and was thrown down hard into the sand of the beach.

His shoulder wound immediately began to burn and sting now that it was once again bound by the rules of this realm, bleeding again and staining the sand red beneath him. Harry turned onto his back in time to see that his gateway was collapsing, unable to link the two realms any longer. Lashes of power whipped off it and he had to think fast to avoid them. Where they hit the sand, a deep gash was cut and the sea water quickly rushed in.

Saving his life, Harry Apparated up the beach closer to the house, tired

from the effort, and then managed to Apparate once more into the sitting room where he and his friends were staying. Well, just Ginny at the moment as Ron and Hermione were on holiday over east.

His gateway crashed and a sonic boom from its passing rocked the windows and split the plaster in some of the walls of the house. It left a deep and wide crater in the sand, which the ocean soon claimed.

As it was, Ginny was beside herself with worry in the kitchen next to the sitting room when Harry Apparated in and landed in a heap of sand and blood on the hard wooden floor. She jumped to her feet when he did, wand out and rushed over to him.

Harry being Harry, he was already trying to stand and actually managed to stagger to his feet when Ginny got her arm around him, wincing when she saw the mess his shoulder had become.

“What happened this time?” she asked, not harshly, but in a resigned sort of way.

Harry grinned at her. “I’m not exactly sure,” he said, as she dropped him onto one of the large leather sofas and immediately began to look at his wound. With her wand she cleaned away all the sand and dried blood, revealing the thick gash and burnt skin. It looked painful and yet Harry’s face was calm.

It began to bleed as soon as she removed the layer of dried blood, so first things first was a skin knitting charm. The DA at the end of last year had been learning healing charms more than offensive spells. Knowing how to heal could be the difference between life and death on a battlefield.

This was a deep cut though, caused by magic, and it would probably hurt to heal.

“Ow,” Harry complained when Ginny cast the healing charm.

“Stop being such a baby,” she chided gently, smiling innocently at him. He glared for a moment and then laughed, leaning his head back and resting a hand on his forehead. His skin melted back together and a moment later, once it had set, Ginny cleaned up the burns.

They were stubborn, unusually so, and when she asked what had caused them, Harry just mumbled something about Stonehenge.

But finally it was done and clean. His cloak and shirt were blood stained, although they were black so it wasn't obvious, and there was a big hole in the right shoulder. His skin had healed over leaving another small scar, one which overlaid the messy lump of scar tissue his shoulder was from the sword wound Voldemort had inflicted in March.

Her work done, Ginny stood up only to sit down on the edge of the sofa above Harry. "Rough morning?" she asked.

"Afraid so," he sighed, eyes closed. "He's made an alliance with the creatures that are Allarius all over again. He'll mask his power next time... I'm sure of it... and bring through thousands of demons. I won't be able to stop it if he does it on the equinox... maybe not even if he uses Stonehenge again."

Ginny blinked. "I'm not sure I understand."

"There is a greater war being fought than you know of, Gin," Harry continued, opening his eyes and staring up without blinking at the ceiling. "The Last War for Creation, for total dominance of Time and every moment of Existence... and I think the good guys are losing...."

Harry's mind was going a mile a minute. Everything had changed now – everything. He wondered if he could contact the Guardians, Godric Gryffindor. If the Destroyers could interfere with the mortal realms, then the Guardians, sworn to protect the Boundary and watch over mortality, could as well. There were millions of Guardians, Harry knew from experience, but he feared they were all too far spread over eternity.

Damn it, why was he saddled with these choices?

A million soldiers, magical soldiers, would be needed to combat an army of Destroyers unleashed upon the world. Merlin, this was getting beyond even the Auror army he had begun to forge. They would be slaughtered under the weight of the Destroyers... what was the use in continuing with that if....

Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn.

"We can't lose with you on our side," Ginny said, unwavering trust in her voice and eyes.

"Perhaps...." Harry replied softly. "But victory could come at so high of a cost as to be indistinguishable from defeat. I've seen it happen before... across many worlds...." He trailed away into regret. "But I'm bringing the mood down, aren't I...."

"Do you have any other adventures that need doing today?" Ginny asked. "Or can we sit down and have a late breakfast/early lunch together?"

Harry chuckled as Ginny playfully punched him in the arm and stood up. It took him a minute but Harry got up as well. "Okay, let's dig into what's left of the cake in the storeroom before Ron gets back and finishes it off."

"Agreed," Ginny grinned. "And then?"

"Then," Harry said, a mischievous smile spreading across his face. "Then, Gin, we can go adventuring."

[Chapter 14 – One World Alone](#)

Whirlwinds of tempestuous fire.

~~John Milton

To have come so far and to have lost so much... the journey was not worth the price paid, the life sacrificed, the blood spilt....

All across Existence, trillions of worlds, trillions upon trillions of worlds, lay desolate and battle scarred, smoking heaps of rocks and death, strewn with the remains of the innocent, of the guilty, and of the heroes.

The War for Creation had claimed a fair quadrant of all of the mortal realms, upon which it was most fiercely fought, and had gutted the Boundary of its life force, polluted the Stream so that its destruction flowed back and forward through time – straining to reach that first drop of Existence, that first flow of time and unmake the glory of everything.

For to the Destroyers, who opposed Creation, the void left from the loss of everything would be bliss, paradise, a darkness over which they could rule for eternity beyond time, for time wouldn't exist and nothing and no one would be able to change it.

With the stakes in the game this high, you only got one chance to make a difference, one chance to set it right, and one chance to save it all.

Harry Potter was that chance now, Godric Gryffindor knew. Everything the Guardians stood for had been lost to the infinitely powerful Destroyers – creatures that had flourished with the absence of the Creator, and that now threatened to undo all that He had made.

As it stood now, Existence and Creation was not worth saving. It had, in so short a time, become a desolate husk under the relentless onslaught of pure evil that had been slowly seeping into its every point since the dawn of time. It polluted everything, and had struck fast and hard.

The Guardians had never stood a chance against that, and nothing they knew of – and they shared the collective knowledge from every world since the Beginning – could save time and undo the Great Destruction. But Harry Potter, a mortal boy who had once stopped the Destruction in a different form, may know of something.

He was unique in Creation as the only mortal to ever jump through worlds, battle the Destroyers and win... and ascend the stairs of the Ways of Twilight. That last had never been done by any other being, mortal or not.

So the eyes of creatures from millions of realms, on all planes of

existence throughout all of time desperately turned to Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, who had saved Existence once before and was the only person in all of Creation that the Destroyers feared....

Gryffindor, who had become commander of this war through the process of elimination – all of the Guardians ranked above him had been slaughtered or obliterated beyond existence – was desperately seeking a way to contact Harry Potter, to enter his mortal world – the world he himself had been born in. For Harry Potter was his descendant. No matter how small events may seem they are all connected....

The Boundary had become almost impossible to navigate through, and it could take weeks to travel the vast distance to Earth – his Earth, the only one that mattered now – and warn.... beg Harry Potter for his help.

Although what he could do seemed insignificant now.... but destiny was that boy, and anything was possible. Gryffindor did not allow himself to feel hope too strongly, but if it existed anywhere it was with Harry Potter, the Darkslayer... the Last Hero.

Gryffindor only prayed, as he moved slowly across the Boundary, doing his best to avoid detection, that he was not too late.

But prayer was futile – no one was listening.

It hadn't taken much to convince the majority of the Australian Ministry staff that Harry was in charge. Mostly it was fear that controlled them, fear and the threat of unemployment. There was also greed, as pay packets for Aurors had been tripled. There was the sense of honour, in some, to keep the country going....

But none of them would have stayed if they had had any idea of the size of the coming storm. They would have fled to spend the last days with their loved ones, for it was indeed coming to the final days of this world, where everything would hinge on the choices of the not quite so sane

Harry Potter.

Ron had grown up with Harry, forged a friendship that had stood the test of time – for especially Harry, he knew – and had been through it all with him for the first five and a half years of the ongoing saga that was Harry's life. But Fate had torn Harry from this world, alone and bereft of friendship it had thrown him across time and space in a never ending hellish battle for existence against creatures so unholy that Death himself had to take a visible hand.

Ron could scarcely comprehend the murder and war, power and dealings, life and death that he had seen in the pensieve of Harry's memory. To have come so far still carrying his sense of right and wrong was not something that should be just merely commended... it was beyond words. Harry was more than human, Ron suspected, but also – through his fights and life – had become so much less.

He didn't... feel... like he had before the circle of light in the Forbidden Forest. Harry had been hard before he left; when he came back he was so beyond hard as to be indestructible. And Ron knew that Harry was damn near indestructible – pretty much everything, even Death, had tried to stop him and he'd just smiled and kept on coming.

But he was dying, Ron knew, and had shared his concerns with Hermione. He was Harry, alive for now, but dead on the inside – dying on the inside.

He could fight, that was obvious, fight and live and do impossible things, but his feelings and emotions, a part of all humans, was struggling to breathe.

And what's more Harry knew it, could see that he was closed off and circling closer to the flame, and seemed to think that that – himself – was a small price to pay to stop Voldemort and save the world.

Only it was more than that. Ron could not explain it, and Hermione felt the same way, but they *knew* that this war was bigger than just Voldemort.

The Dark Lord stood at its head, extremely powerful and single minded in his destruction of life, but there were higher powers at work here... powers beyond even Harry....

No, that was not quite right – there was nothing beyond Harry, for he'd beaten it all to get back to this one moment in time where he could save the goddamn day forever. But there was something and it gave Ron a headache to think about.

Something Harry knew of but was keeping quiet about. He had heard whispers from Ginny about a.... *War for Creation*, and how Harry was trying to avoid it but had, through no choice of his own, become the key player.

Once again it was up to Harry Potter, and that made Ron angry. When was it Harry's turn to rest?

He feared the answer did not rest in this life.

Ron sat with Hermione in a beanbag overlooking the ocean in the window seat of the sitting room in Harry's house/base. It was approaching sunset, that mystical hour of twilight that meant so much to the workings of time and space that it was almost beyond comprehension. Today they had finished the pensieve memory, after being at it for over a week.

Needless to say, the both of them were shaken to their very core. Harry had... well; he had answered so many questions about life, the universe, and everything that it was really no real mystery anymore. Words cannot adequately describe the feeling that the universe has a purpose, that we are all threads in a web so thick and intricate that billions of them could snap away and the web would still hold.

Billions of them had snapped away, as the evil in the scar link between Harry and Voldemort had scoured trillions upon trillions of worlds across different points in time to reach him, to keep them connected. That link, the evil, had given birth to Allarius, the Destroyer's creation, and

Existence's damnation.

He had died – this entire world had died. In another reality, one that was chillingly real to Harry, Allarius had come to this world and killed him, killed

Hermione.... killed Ginny. The demon had taunted Harry as they battled for the future of everything, taunted him with a thought so painful that Harry had torn apart a city and a world to destroy the beast.

That hadn't worked, and in the end only love had destroyed the demon. Power the Dark Lord knew not, that is all but useless to Harry now as he didn't have the heart in him anymore to use it. Everything was over; everything had been for nought if Harry didn't learn to feel again.

Victory would be indistinguishable from defeat. So much would fall, be lost, that wasn't even human... and that maelstrom of death and destruction swirled around Harry Potter.

Nothing more needed to be said at that, Ron thought, if Harry could not save the day then it was all over.

"What do you reckon, Hermione?" Ron asked, his head resting on the top of her head as the azure twilight claimed the sky and the tide swayed gently on the beach. "Did you see this coming when we started Hogwarts?"

Hermione had been crying all day, on and off, and burst into tears every time she saw Harry. That had unnerved the saviour of everything quite a bit, and he'd gone off to run his country. And that, Harry as Minister, was nothing compared to this.

Worlds that were, never could be, and are... all a stone's throw away if you knew how to get there.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione sighed, breathing heavily into his chest. "How are we supposed to help Harry? This is so... big! Beyond us... Harry's

fighting a
whole different war than we could have imagined.”

Ron shrugged, watching the fading beams of sunlight dance on the window. “We’ll just have to be there for him – nothing more and nothing less. I think, in the end, it will come down to Harry on his own, but we have to make him remember that he is human before then... otherwise what the hell will he think he’s fighting for?”

Hermione sat up at that, and looked at Ron as if she had never seen him before. After a long moment, where so much was said without words, Hermione whispered, “I love you....”

Ron nodded and then held her close. He was still thinking about the future, and whether they’d have one after what was coming had played out.

And after all of that... there was Ethan Rafe.

He was still alive, a part of him anyway, stuck in Harry’s mind and talking to him, projecting himself out into the real world. Invisible to all other eyes, but in the pensieve he could be seen, as it is what Harry saw, and yes, the Dark Lord’s son was still alive, living on in Voldemort’s last real enemy.

It was odd and scary to think that Harry was never alone, and that none of them could ever be alone with Harry. Ethan Rafe, the enigmatic shadow, was Harry’s conscience – they thought alike, argued alike, were alike. Ethan had travelled with Harry, blazing a trail of death across everything and everywhere.

Harry and Ethan had done big things, and were extremely feared and revered for it.

“Where do you think we’ll end up, Ron? Once all is said and done....”

Ron frowned and opened his mouth to say something, but ended up just shaking his head. "I don't know," he said. And for lack of any other answer, he said it again, "I don't know...."

"Two hundred and fifty new recruits within the last week, Minister," Stephen Cornwall said to Harry, who was seated in his chair in the Minister's office at the Ministry in Canberra. "Most of them are dodgy characters though and are here for the money. I wouldn't trust them as far as I could throw them to hold their own on a battlefield. That said, it will take at least six months to train them to any sort of reasonable standard."

"You have two, maybe." Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. He had another headache – it seemed it was odd if he didn't these days. No matter.

"Every wand we can put on the field is worth it, Stephen, remember that – it'll be important should other... parties... take an interest in this war."

Cornwall raised an eyebrow, looking from the tired form of Harry Potter and then briefly at the auburn haired girl that stood behind him, one hand on his shoulder. "Other parties...?"

Harry grinned, baring his teeth. It wasn't an overly comforting smile. "Demons, Mr Cornwall," he laughed bitterly. "Nightmares."

Cornwall licked his lips slowly before saying anything, and glanced at Ginny again – whose face was eerily calm. "Sh... should we expect these nightmares any time soon?"

Harry laughed, leaning back into his chair. "I hope not, Cornwall, otherwise things are going to get really difficult.... but, expect the worst. How many men could I send into battle right now?"

Cornwall frowned and thought for a moment. "Four hundred, I'd say, maybe more and maybe less. We need to leave some to defend our own

soil.”

Harry nodded. “Then it is time to raise the stakes, Stevie,” he grinned. “I want to issue a... proclamation, worldwide.”

“Saying what?”

“That anyone willing to fight against Lord Voldemort can come here and join the army – yes, we’re creating an army – one that I’ll outfit with weapons similar to the Twilight Guardians, and be paid fifty galleons a week, and that rises by fifteen galleons for every month of service.”

Quite simply, and to the point, Cornwall said, “You’ll start a riot. We’ll have all sorts of criminals and madmen signing up.”

“The madder the better,” Harry whispered seriously. “They won’t lose as much when they see what’s coming.”

“Nightmares?”

“And worse....”

Cornwall shook his head. “This is insane,” he said, and Harry appreciated his honesty. “If it doesn’t save the world it will destroy it!”

Harry shrugged. If that was what happened then so be it. He was exhausted, running on empty and, after a century of war, was looking forward to the end – even if it meant total and utter annihilation. But he’d fight – go down with his palms blazing.

“To tell you the truth, Stevie,” Harry sighed. “I’m not sure if we can save this world, but if we unite then we can try and save everything else.”

And to what Stephen Cornwall thought of that, Harry would never know, as the man was rent asunder as the air around him twisted and turned, broiled and bubbled, wrenching open a dark passage between worlds

that split him in half. His dismembered body flailed on the carpet for a second, surging with blood, and then lay still.

Ginny screamed, Harry was already standing with his palms ignited, and a cruel pale hand reached out through the tear of darkness. It was followed by a skeletal arm, a thin white body and a bald head that was eyeless. The creature – whatever it was – scorched the ground it stood upon, burning the carpet and what remained of Stephen Cornwall.

Harry calmly stepped in front of Ginny, waiting quite patiently as the beast stood tall, sniffing the air with the pale slits of its nose and hissing when it obviously detected Harry.

“Potter...?” it said – gurgled through a throat obviously in ruins.

“Who sent you to your death?” Harry asked the monster, clenching his fists and cracking his knuckles.

It laughed, stepping in the entrails of a man Harry had needed to control the Auror force. Its breath seemed to hang in the air like a putrid yellow cloud, before dissipating in a haze.

“I bring you an offer, Darkslayer,” the creature grinned, showing a row of sharp yellow teeth. Ginny flinched and pressed her hand against his back.

“Oh? From who?”

“The Legion of the Destroyer, the rightful rulers of time and creation, are willing to offer an agreement for peace.”

Harry snorted. “Peace... your kind do not know the meaning of the word. I remember your crimes during the last war. Millions slaughtered, butchered... raped and sent adrift into the void. I was there, remember? Peace... there will be no peace. Not until each and every one of you is dead.”

Again, that throaty laughter emanated from the demon. "It would be wise, Darkslayer, to listen.... A force of Destroyers billions strong, strengthened by the demon spawn of the between space, is poised to attack and destroy your universe. Your crimes against the Destroyers are not forgotten either... we will offer you this universe, we will spare it, if you remain neutral in the War of Creation."

Harry stared long and hard at the monster, the disgrace and waste of life, a scout of a force so inevitably strong that to fight seemed insane. Well, these creatures had driven Harry insane before, and he had no fear of them.

"You must have known," he said to the creature, pushing Ginny back behind his chair. He didn't know if the creature could see her, but he was taking no chances. "Must have known that I would not even consider such an offer. One universe for everything else? Oh no, all or nothing, you fools."

The creature hissed, but did nod, accepting his response.

"We expected that, Potter... we could have had a truce," it croaked, visibly trembling. "You have just doomed the Light to eternal darkness. The

Guardians are defeated, lost, strewn throughout time. You have no allies, you are alone, and the entire expanse of the Boundary and its minions are under Destroyer control and will be set against you, only you...."

Harry gritted his teeth, itching to destroy this foul beast. "I've had worse odds," he growled.

Though not by much, Ethan commented wryly. He'd been silent the last few days, tired of the Great Game.

The creature screeched now, losing its temper, and the glass in the room shattered. Harry didn't flinch but Ginny fell to the floor, covering her ears and shielding her face from the rain of sharp fragments.

The black tear in reality that had brought this creature was still seething behind it, drawing in the light and pulsating slightly. The monster took a step back towards it, still screeching.

“Not even you will escape the flames of what is coming, Potter,” it said, ceasing its shrieking. “We will teach you to fear for eternity... your soul, boy, will forever reside in torment.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” Harry said dryly, hitting the desk in front of him with his glowing palm and propelling it into the wall, where it splintered and destroyed one or two cabinets and portraits. The occupants in them had long since fled in terror. He had heard all of this, and rubbish like it, many times before.

“No truce with the Destroyers!” he shouted. “No peace, no offers, no hope! I’ll give you an offer – the Destroyer army is to destroy itself, and save me the trouble... for I’ll be coming, with the fury of the human race behind me I will be coming!”

“You are weak against this, Darkslayer, you will not survive. You have no plan, *you* have no hope! Hope never existed... There is no one to help you. You have nothing!”

Harry paused, speculated on that for a moment, and then smiled that insane smile. Evil itself had felt fear at seeing that smile. “You’re right,” Harry told it, spinning his palms together and weaving silent destructive magic. A spiral of gold and red light formed quickly. “You are absolutely right... and you’re scared to death of me because of that.”

“NOOOOOO!”

The room shook as the creature dived for its portal back into the Boundary, but Harry was ready for that. He unleashed his spiral of power and as fast as the speed of light, which can circle the world seven times a second, the inertia of his power simply unravelled the monster. It disappeared in a cloud of light, destroyed, blasted beyond even time.

And that was what the end of that day brought for Harry, as he walked back across the room towards Ginny, who was busy getting to her feet and brushing the shards of glass from her hair carefully.

"We're in trouble, Gin," Harry sighed, falling back into his chair. All that had to be done could wait for one minute, as he rested and absorbed this latest development.

"I know," Ginny replied.

"There is an army of billions, who will ally themselves with Voldemort for his power, about to knock our door down... and all I've got are four hundred Aurors."

You may not even have that now, with Cornwall's death, Ethan whispered.

"I know," Ginny said again. "And all we've got is you, Harry Potter, but I'll be damned if that isn't enough."

Once upon a time there was a boy named Harry Potter....

He was a wizard....

And lived, comparatively speaking, a normal life....

He had friends, he went to school, and he made enemies....

Enemies that could wield awesome powers... that had no respect for life, and indeed hated it with a passion that burnt brighter than any star...

Harry was a hero, the Last True Hero, and the Darkslayer.... the Light's final hope for salvation.... a desperate bid by a Power long lost to save Creation....

Harry was a boy, lost in adventure and power that consumed him, destroyed his mind....

He was hunted... tortured... all across Existence....

But when things were looking grim for the hero.... something always pulled him through....

Some touch he possessed kept him safe.... if not so safe then alive after it all....

Harry struggled to find his way home.... stumbling blindly in the dark for a needle in a haystack as big as the universe....

He found it... and recreated all his enemies, the Destroyers and the demons... to get home....

But if he didn't come home then nothing would have mattered anyway....

Caught between a rock and a hard place... Twilight opened for the hero and Creation was given its last coin toss, roll of the dice, hand of cards...

All or nothing this time, it said, tired of Evil and Destruction....

This time, this game, the hero would play for the whole cake....

Reunited with his friends, Harry Potter set out to unite humanity under one banner... to send them into war against the Dark Lord Voldemort....

But those in power denied our hero, and left him no choice but to take all he could and throw together an army to stand against the Dark Lord....

That was going pretty well until the War for Creation spilled into his universe.... billions of creatures allying themselves with Voldemort to destroy him....

Harry was understandably upset about this, but also felt a small glimmer

of satisfaction that the Destroyer army was gathering all its strength in one place.... hanging itself, really....

In a fairytale we all live happily ever after... but that doesn't exist here... this is no fairytale....

Dreams of Twilight, of life and love, failed in Harry's mind now... as he had no time and no strength for which to battle the Storm on the horizon of Existence....

But fight it he must, for everything....

For his Soul... for a bargain with Death... because doing so was just right!

Everything must have a Beginning, and so do we approach the End of everything....

One world, with only one hope, was left to stand against the Destroyers. But it was the one world that mattered!

Harry Potter would see to that....

Once upon a time... we fought a dream... and in the end did we live at all?

I don't know what to do, Harry told Ethan.

It had been two days since the Destroyer had killed Stephen Cornwall in the Australian Ministry, and now Harry's control on that power base was shaky. He had promoted the most senior Auror to the position of Deputy Minister, but the woman wasn't as agreeable as Cornwall had been. Sometimes she was outright hostile, and only just did what he told her to do.

Admirable, but she was only hastening this world's defeat. He couldn't make her see that. Maggie Thorn, the new Deputy Minister, had looked at him as if he had gone mad when he explained what had killed Cornwall, and that there was an army not only threatening this world from upon it... but also beyond it.

She could be a problem, if not watched – and she had refused the squad of Twilight Guardians as protection. All six squads were now back and resting in his house, waiting for the next mission. Harry had been to see the British Prime Minister yesterday, to explain the situation, and after many, many hours he had managed to convince the man that an army of *something* was about to attack the world.

That meant the British Army, the British Muggle Army, needed new weapons, and Harry was the only person on the planet who could and would provide them. He just needed more magical people loyal to him to help make the modifications and crystals that powered the terrible guns.

Roll with the punches for now, Ethan replied, shrugging in his mind. *The odds are high and that's all you can really do....*

I need Dumbledore's influence, Harry sighed. *But the man doesn't trust me and probably never will again.*

Ethan snorted. *Is that why you're doing this?*

Aye, Harry whispered, as he ran his fingers down the coarse length of his pensieve. The silver memory swirled at his touch, but remained level and smooth. Caring little about the consequences, Harry opened a small gateway in the air – not very large – that looked through onto Dumbledore's desk at Hogwarts, in his office.

He only felt the slightest resistance at breaking through the castles many wards, and when the square gateway stretched to its full length, Harry saw that the old man was not there. Fawkes the phoenix was, and he uttered a small note of surprise as Harry levitated the pensieve through the gateway and deposited it on Dumbledore's desk.

Attached to it was a note, explaining the truth.

Professor Dumbledore,

The future does not exist – none of it has to happen. I will fight for it the only way I know how.

Harry Potter

“Well that is that,” Ron said, once Harry had closed the gateway and collapsed backwards onto the leather sofa by the coffee table in the centre of his large sitting room.

“Done is done,” agreed Harry, as Ginny rested her hand upon his on the chair arm. “One more choice that may or may not see us through....”

“What now?” asked Hermione, hugging her knees and resting her chin on them next to Ron. “What... next?”

She directed the question towards Harry, as it was he who was in charge of this. No one else could be... no one else could even understand the mountain of war stretching clear across the horizon.

“It’s time I explained a few things,” Harry said, looking to each of his friends in turn. “What we’re doing, why we’re doing it, and what we’re up against.”

It felt uncomfortable to say ‘we’re’ after spending so long doing everything alone, fighting it all alone – defeating it all alone and ending it all alone.

“The War for Creation,” Ginny said, squeezing his hand. “Demons and Destroyers... nightmares.”

“Voldemort,” Ron said glumly. “Death Eaters and about ten thousand Inferi....”

Hermione blinked, looked a bit helpless for a moment, and then added more enemies to the list.... "Dementors...Vampires, Harry, they won't have forgotten about you."

"Nor I them," Harry said, without fear or feeling. It was just a simple statement. He smiled though, before speaking again. "There are a lot of enemies, we agree," he said. "A lot of enemies – we are surrounded. Humanity in this universe, and all others, stands upon the brink of destruction... but I want you to understand what we are really fighting."

He let that hang in the air for a minute, watching his friends, before continuing.

"Evil," he said, "is all a matter of perspective. Voldemort does not consider himself the villain of this story, even though we know he is... from our perspective he is. He's not the first, but he could be the last, monster capable of destruction and slaughter on such a scale that the effects will reverberate throughout time forever. If time continues to exist, that is – and we cannot be certain it will... or even if it ever did... but that's beside the point."

"He is evil," Ron said. "No matter which way you look at it... he just *is* wrong."

Harry shrugged. "The Destroyers are Creation's dirty little secrets. Beings of evil, of suffering, of pain and malice with the single goal of obliterating life in all its forms. They form half of a whole. Good and Evil, Light and Dark.... the Balance between them, set down at the Beginning, has been tilting in Evil's favour ever since."

"Why?" Ginny asked quietly, enthralled by the way Harry spoke – simply but deeply, with the voice of experience.

Harry glared at nothing that they could see. "Because what ever force created the web of Existence abandoned it to its own ends. Abandoned

it or died for it, either way we were left without a Divine presence in all of our lives. A feeling of oneness with Creation – and for lack of that evil has flourished everywhere for time beyond count.

“The Destroyers are coming now, here, with their entire force behind them. Billions upon billions of enemies that are nothing but shadow, or could be as tall as a giant, strong as one as well. Hate and fear in all of its forms, power unimaginable allying itself with Voldemort to ensure my destruction, and, as a consequence of that, Creation’s annihilation.”

Harry paused there and glanced speculatively ahead of him into the reflective glass of the coffer table, at the bottles of Coca Cola half empty on there and to the space where the pensieve had sat a few minutes ago.

“I...” he said. “I don’t want that to happen, but our chances of stopping it have grown very slim. We, this world, but us five especially, are all that stand between life and oblivion across *everything*.”

“Five?” frowned Ron, counting them. Himself, Harry, Ginny and Hermione.

Harry grinned and tapped his forehead, where Ethan Rafe resided.

Ron continued to frown but then his eyes glimmered with understanding. “Ah, yeah... five....”

I think I’d welcome oblivion if it finally let me die, Ethan said morosely. But I’m with you for this last dance, Potter. Who would have thought I... we’d come so far? I was betting against it from day one.

“Then we should fight,” Ginny said, gritting her teeth and once again squeezing his calloused hand.

“How do we do that?” Hermione asked, shaking her head. “I hate to say it... but we’re outnumbered a million to one by creatures dozens of times more powerful than all of us could ever be... well, save Harry.”

Harry inclined his head and smiled. "It's not as bad as all that...."

Yes *it is*, Ethan sung, and showed Harry a mental image of one of the larger battlefields he had been on. One littered with the corpses of a million men. The very clouds on that world had been tinged red with blood, evaporated from the crimson water. Harry, as always, was the only survivor.

He shook that away, a shadow of regret and pain passing over his face. His friends saw it, but remained silent.

"There is always a way out, a way to survive, if you look for it," Harry told Hermione. "I changed time and space to get back here, to stop Creation from collapsing and, although it took me some time, I did do it. We are not beaten yet."

"Do you have a plan, Harry?" Ginny asked, looking anxious. She was biting her bottom lip and her eyes were quivering with unshed tears.

Harry shrugged, trying to look unconcerned but failing miserably. A leader had to be strong though, had to show those under him that everything was fine. "We humans...." he began. "We are stronger than this Existence has given us credit for. We can fight, we will fight...."

"So," Hermione said irately. "You're just going to put a gun into the hands of every man and woman you can?"

"And child...." Harry whispered.

"Harry!" Hermione and Ginny exclaimed. Ron had paled, but Harry thought he saw the need.

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked the girls. "Any at all? I'll do my best to destroy as much of this army as I can, but it isn't going to be easy. Even if the billions of humans on this planet fight, every one of them, we are still going to be overwhelmed. To save life, to preserve hope and

light, we may need to sacrifice our own world! And I won't let that happen!"

Harry didn't raise his voice, but that perhaps only made him that much more frightening. Hermione didn't think he was aware of the way blue sparks flittered across his eyes when he was angry, or sad, or passionate.... or the way the light seemed to bend around him, giving his skin an ethereal glow. It was only there a few seconds, but that was more than enough.

Harry didn't just fight for the Light... in a way he was the Light. All that was left in an existence where Evil had flourished since the Beginning of Time.

It wasn't hard to see why that same evil feared him so... he was indestructible.

No, it wasn't that, Hermione knew. He wasn't indestructible – he was mortal, that was what the Destroyers feared. They had defeated everything set against them, save for one mortal boy – Harry Potter, who possessed a will of steel to see this through to the end. They couldn't and didn't understand that.

"We won't let it happen," Ron said, putting his arm across Hermione's shoulders and drawing her close. "Merlin... this just doesn't seem real...."

"Believe it," Harry said, chuckling with a hint of bitterness. "This is as real as it gets."

"What's today's date?" Ginny asked.

"July 14th," Hermione replied.

She nodded, turning to look at Harry. "How long do you think we have?"

Harry shrugged. "A few months, at best. It will take the Destroyers time in our reality to gather their forces."

“What do you want us to do?”

Harry smiled sadly. He couldn't believe it had all played out this way. One hundred years of fighting to save it all... destroyed in a few months by a quirk of Fate. Harry had recreated Allarius, those who are Evil, in the form of the Destroyers. They had always existed, and were now making their bid for total domination.

All that stood between Evil and the end of Creation was Harry Potter, and the human inhabitants of one small world – most of who had no idea of what was coming.

“I need crystals for weaponry,” Harry told Ron, Hermione, and Ginny. “I'm going to introduce you to the Twilight Guardians – you'll each be under their protection, and they yours – and I'll show you how to charge crystals with magic so that they work in Muggle weaponry.”

“And what will you be doing while we're doing this?” Ginny asked.

“I'll be trying to unite the human race under me,” Harry replied with a heavy sigh. “I'll be engaging Death Eaters and Inferi... Dementors and Vampires... with my squad of Aurors and men from the Muggle armies. I'll be telling the world what's coming, showing them when I have to.”

And so there they were. Five friends with a plan to save their world, to save every world, and with so little time to do it. Harry knew he would have to continue taking over world Ministries, and set his sights on America next. Taking out the superpower would nudge the rest of the dominoes.

Here's hoping they'd fall.

Call to Arms

From this day forth, July 15th, the Army of the Darkslayer is recruiting from all over the world. All able-bodied men and women over sixteen years of age are invited to fight against the Dark Lord Voldemort, for the future safety of our world.

You will serve under Commander Harry Potter, the Darkslayer, and receive a weekly wage of fifty galleons. Wage increased by the sum of fifteen galleons for every month of service.

With the threat of war looming over this entire world, know that you can make a difference, can fight for a brighter tomorrow.

Weapons, training, food and housing provided. All applicants should approach the Australian Ministry of Magic.

It was printed in every Magical newspaper on the planet, hundreds of them, announced on the Wizarding Wireless, sent out within thousands of proclamations carried by owl post. Not one corner of the magical world failed to hear about it in the following days....

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, was marshalling a tremendous army to wage war against He Who Must Not Be Named, who was rumoured to have Vampires and Inferi by their thousands, as well as Dementors and Death Eaters.

There was outrage at the decree – many world leaders tried to censor it immediately, but it was out there. Common public knowledge, and within the first two days hundreds of potential soldiers had flooded to Australia.

Harry had the Ministry build dozens of barracks in the large and empty outback plains of Australia, in the desert. They were huge, could house thousands upon thousands, and yet filled an area only three square kilometres wide. The grey stone and hastily put together buildings were a damn sight bigger on the inside than out.

They filled up fast as well. By July 18th, three days after the proclamation was issued, one thousand, three hundred and forty eight wizards and witches were moved into the barracks, pending acceptance of their application into the army.

Hundreds more were arriving every few hours. The Ministry in Canberra was devoted almost entirely to shipping these men and women, most of them dregs of society, to the military base in the middle of the desert. Keeping them well stocked and supplied was another matter entirely, but it was done.

Harry spent two and a half million of his own galleons in the first few days, subsidized in part by the Ministry he controlled.

The soldiers were ranged all across the spectrum. There were hardened criminals escaping justice, old and young men looking for a fight, Aurors who found the pay better with Harry, Aurors who wanted to fight Voldemort, men and women who had no other prospects and nowhere else to go....

They came in all shapes and sizes, disciplined severely by the Twilight Guardians Harry had dispatched to supervise over the growing barracks and begin training with the mixed muggle/magic technology. He would need more men and women to do that, and such people were being briefed by the Muggle Prime Minister quickly on the situation.

Harry had found a fellow warrior in that man. A man who wasn't in power for his own gains, but honestly wanted to serve his people. A man who had withstood the backlash from ten thousand grave robberies admirably.... a man who understood the need to wipe Voldemort off the face of the earth.

They were two of a kind, the last of a dying breed of fighters.

Whatever they were, it had now begun. There was no turning back, no time to be afraid, and only a slim hope for the future.

July 19th

It may be safe to say that over the years, Harry had gained one or two scars from the fights he had fought, the battles he had won, and the life that he had led.

His joints ached in the morning when he woke from the few hours of sleep he allowed himself to have. His knees and thighs, his shoulders down to his elbows, as well as his lower back all bit at him with an aching and constant pain that he knew he would carry for life.

There was no cure for these old wounds – scars that he wore like badges of honour and regret – cold reminders that he wasn't meant to find peace in this life, or any other. That it was his place and always would be his place to fight the good fight.

Early that morning, just as the sun crested the eastern horizon, Harry was out jogging on the beach outside of his manor house. He had found that it helped to work out the pains in his joints, which if left alone became unbearable after a few hours. It had been many long years since he had been able to really run, to sprint, to throw it all to the wind, and this was as close as he could come now.

The sand was hard near the swaying tide and yet he still left deep indentations with his bare feet as he propelled himself down the beach. With the wind in his hair and eyes, he felt his joints loosen and the pain recede after the first mile.

He really felt free of all the responsibility as he raced the rising sun further west, disturbed a flock of seagulls, and dodged the rotting carcass of a large fish in his path. He was just a human, just one life form, on what could possibly be the only planet in this universe that held life.

Nothing mattered but the smell of the salt, the rush of the wind, and the breath in his lungs. His heart was pounding in his chest, the dunes and cliffs on his right whooshed by, and he noticed a large tanker out in the shipping lanes of the ocean beyond the coral reef.

The large manor house that had once hosted parties to the elite of the wizarding world, and was now playing host to the kids that had to save Creation, slowly disappeared around a bend in the beach.

Harry ran across sand that hadn't felt a human foot in years, decades even. This part of the world was so seldom used, that the large ocean salmon swam without fear of being plucked out of the water on the end of the hook just a few feet out into the calm sea. Harry would have been willing to bet that they would swim around his ankles.

He saw kangaroos up on the distant dunes, and even glimpsed a camel once, as well as a variety of native Australian birds.

Eventually, breathing heavily, he fell onto the warm sand and let the early morning sunlight wash over him. He wore a simple white shirt and shorts, and at that moment did not look quite like the most feared human in all of Time and Space.

You're out of shape, Ethan said. That was barely five miles.

"Pretty good for a hundred and seventeen year old," Harry breathed. "Anyway, I don't see you winning any marathons."

"I'll race you back," Ethan challenged, appearing before Harry. He wore a neon pink running suit of Muggle design, and reached down to touch his toes – stretching.

Before Harry knew what he was doing, he was laughing and clutching his sides. Ethan in pink track pants was so unexpected that it made him forget everything that troubled him for just a few seconds. And he truly laughed.

“You’re on,” Harry said, standing up and shaking the sand off.

Ethan grinned and winked. It was obvious he would win – seeing as how he couldn’t tire and would have to stay ahead of Harry to be seen by his eyes, but it was the small things that mattered.

Despite their history, Harry and Ethan were friends most of the time. They had been together so long that neither properly knew how to function without the other. It would be both a sad and joyous day when they were finally separated.

“On three,” Harry said. “Three!”

Harry went all out the five miles back to the house. His palms blazed as he used his raw energy to throw himself across the sand, churning it up and leaving a deep rift in his wake. Ethan, of course, left no footprints. He annoyed one or two birds and Ethan stayed one or two metres ahead the whole way. It only took twenty seconds, and Harry could have done it in one if he had wanted to.

When the house loomed up before them, Ethan inclined his head and disappeared – grinning at his victory.

Harry swatted the air where he had been and then Apparated up into the showers of the room he had chosen for himself within the house.

The shower water felt good across his old joints and scarred skin, washing away the grime and sweat. Stepping out of the shower, Harry dried himself with a blast of warm air and stepped out of his en suite bathroom naked into his bedroom.

Yes, not wearing a stitch he stepped into his room and scared the hell out of Hermione, who jumped two foot into the air when she saw him and quickly turned around, muttering fast and jumbled apologies.

Ginny was there as well, and although her cheeks quickly became

stained red, she smiled appreciatively before turning around herself and giggling.

“Merlin, Harry,” Ron said as Harry was still blinking in surprise at finding his room occupied. “Put it away! You’re embarrassing Hermione’s parents.”

Oh yes, everyone was there. Brian and Janet Granger stood near Ron opposite the bed and next to the door.

Ethan was rolling around laughing in his head as Harry cursed and quickly summoned his clothes whilst jumping back into the bathroom. He closed the door firmly behind him as Ron’s laughter echoed Ethan’s.

Cursing himself for not sensing anyone in the room, Harry grumbled as he pulled on his jeans and buttoned up his black short sleeved shirt.

“Right,” he said, stepping back out into the room with all the dignity he could muster. The saviour of all time and creation was not blushing! “What can I do for all of you this fine morning?”

Ron was still quivering with laughter, while Mrs Granger and Hermione were looking apologetic and Ginny was grinning slyly. Mr Granger seemed to be fighting his own laughter.

“Sorry for just barging in Harry,” Hermione said. “But we didn’t think you’d be....”

“All natural,” Ron finished, sniggering again. “But, by God, Harry. How did you get that scar across your chest?”

Grinning himself, Harry replied, “Dragon.”

“Dragon?” Hermione said uncertainly.

“Dragon,” Harry repeated. “Big teeth... very sharp....”

And this one didn't breathe fire, Ethan chuckled.

"Could breathe acid...." Harry trailed away. "Anyway... why are we all here so early?"

Hermione blinked, and then suddenly looked very excited. "We've found something that might help, Harry," she said. "You said you wanted me to research the Darkslayer, well I mentioned it to mum and she said...."

Janet Granger stepped forward, glancing at her daughter and at the sudden way Harry Potter stood rigid, staring at her without blinking.

"There's a fairytale," Mrs Granger said. "I studied dentistry at university, where I met Brian, but my minor was in Ancient Egyptian mythology. Anyway, there was a story that the people of that time told to their children about a man called the Darkslayer. Just a bedtime story...."

"Stories are what make a universe...." Harry whispered. *Did the answer to his questions lie within the mind of Hermione's mother, from a story four thousand or so years dead?*

"Etiam, aiunt facio," Mrs Granger replied with a small smile.

Harry frowned at that, but then he realised that he had spoken last in Latin without consciously being aware of it. How did that happen? It was odd.... what had Mrs Granger just said? *Etiam, aiunt facio* – roughly translated through much grammar and dialect meant, *Yes, they do*. Well, Harry knew enough Latin to be going on with.

"It is a very symbolic story, actually," Mrs Granger continued. "Some have even speculated that it was the basis for all religion...."

Harry nodded, not sure where this was going. Hermione saw that he was becoming confused and intervened.

"This story," Hermione said, staring directly into Harry's eyes to make sure he understood. "This *fairytale*, Harry, speaks about the... the Hand

of God.”

“The Hand of God?” Harry whispered, his throat suddenly very dry.

“A man,” Hermione continued ominously. “A man the people called the Darkslayer.”

And with that... the plot thickened!

[Chapter 15 – We'll Die Standing Tall](#)

In the name of the best within you, do not sacrifice this world to those who are its worst. In the name of the values that keep you alive, do not let your vision of man be distorted by the ugly, the cowardly, the mindless in those who have never achieved his title. Do not lose your knowledge that man's proper estate is an upright posture, an intransigent mind and a step that travels unlimited roads. Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark, in the hopeless swamps of the approximate, the not-quite, the not-yet, the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but have never been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it's yours.

~~Rand

July 23^d

“It’s Harry’s birthday soon, his seventeenth,” Ginny said, sitting with Ron and Hermione at the breakfast table on that warm Australian morning. She absently swirled the last dregs of her soggy cornflakes around the bowl, and thought about the upcoming event.

Technically it was his one hundredth and eighteenth birthday. He looked seventeen but had the memories of a life one hundred and eighteen years long. But that was a lot of candles on a cake, so seventeen it would be.

“We should make an effort to do something nice,” Hermione said carefully.

Ron snorted. “He probably won’t even remember it’s his birthday unless we remind him. He worries about too much, I reckon.”

Ginny smiled sadly. “Just the salvation of Time and Creation, Ron, just that....”

Ron blinked. “Oh yeah... that. Well, we’ll do something cool then for his birthday so he can forget about that.”

Hermione smiled and squeezed Ron’s shoulder. “The question is – what? What’s exciting and fun for a man who’s travelled across all of time and space battling monsters and saving worlds?”

“Anything normal,” Ginny said, having been giving it a lot of thought. “*Truly great men dream of the normal life they have been denied.* I read that somewhere.”

“Balloons and sparklers then,” Hermione grinned. “And a huge cake!”

Ron pushed away his empty plate, scraped clean of food, and leaned back in his chair with a sigh. On his lap was the book on military tactics that

Harry had given him to study. It was fascinating stuff and he just simply understood most of it. Even Hermione got confused in parts, but to Ron the tactics and battle plans clicked in his head.

It was a lot like chess.

“It’ll probably be just us four then – if we count Ethan.... but we can make

something happen, I think.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Ginny said, standing up. “Harry wanted us to work on powering crystals today, so we should do that.”

Perth, Western Australia

As Ron, Hermione and Ginny were plotting his birthday surprise, Harry was walking casually down a glittering Muggle street in the city of Perth, on the western coast of Australia.

High rise buildings covered in tinted black glass rose high above him on either side, as crowds of people swelled by on either side – completely oblivious to who and what he was. Dressed in a simple pair of jeans and a transfigured black shirt, Harry blended in almost seamlessly with the crowds.

Hands in pockets, Harry’s eyes constantly scanned his surroundings for signs of danger and anything at all out of place. This city was just like the hundreds of others he had visited across time. Cars streamed by – as well as buses and bikes – and the sidewalks were full of people either shopping, heading to work, leaving work, and otherwise living out their small and relatively content lives in blissful ignorance to the wave of nightmares that was about to crash onto the world.

A street vendor tried to sell him a greasy hotdog that may or may not have been meat. Harry ignored the man and carried on slowly down the street.

He was just a kid, probably skived the day off school – nothing more.

His scar was burning quite terribly today. Since he got up three hours ago the cursed lightning bolt had felt like a white hot branding iron pressing into his skull. He, of course, showed no outward sign of the pain, but it was increasingly uncomfortable and could only mean disaster.

Voldemort was reaching out to him through the link, he felt that much, and battering down the defences around his mind – trying hard to wash away

who he was, why he was... the Dark Lord was toying with him from his throne lost in a pocket of time at Slytherin Fortress. It was a measure of the strength of the curse link that it could punch through a barrier separating millenniums to plague him so now.

A homeless man was lying against the side of a boarded up shop, his ragged hat before him holding a few coins that kind pedestrians had dropped in out of pity for the scraggly bearded fellow. Most just walked on by as if he wasn't there, and to them he wasn't. Just part of the scenery, a part of the city – as normal as the skyscrapers and cars. They ignored it.

Digging into his pocket, Harry removed a layer of bills from the vast amount of cash he had stored in the magically expanded fabric, and casually dropped \$10,000 Australian dollars into the man's hat. He didn't stop, just kept walking and smiled only slightly when he heard the man gasp and burst into tears of joy.

Looking at the street signs, Harry saw the one he needed and turned down onto *Hay Street*. It was a long street that pretty much cut right through the centre of the city. He was heading towards a bookstore that he had found in the phonebook. A specialist bookstore – one that dealt in rarely sought after texts.

Boffins, it was called, and Harry kept a careful eye out for it now. He had passed a small restaurant, an accounting firm, a coffee house and a McDonald's before he spotted the green letters atop of a white background that caught the light of the morning in a curving script which pleased the eye.

Boffins

Harry stumbled on the sidewalk before he reached it however, as his scar sent a sharp bolt of crippling pain throughout his entire body. He

didn't scream, but it was a damn near thing.

Holding his head, his vision swayed and for a moment everything grew dark and he saw an all too familiar pair of narrowed crimson eyes. They were searching for him, seeking him out – Harry stared right back into those eyes with all the hate and anger he could muster.

To anyone that looked at him then, it would have seemed as if he was glaring at a piece of old chewing gum stuck to the sidewalk.

Laughter rang out in his mind – cold and bitter – before the darkness faded to light and he was back on the street outside the bookstore. Swatting at his head angrily, Harry shook away the dizziness and entered the shop. Voldemort wanted to play games did he.... well, Harry had been playing this game a lot longer than Riddle had....

Rows and shelves of neat and organised books disappeared around the corner of the store and up a winding polished wood staircase framed with stainless steel that led to yet more rows of books on the second floor, and eventually to the third and final floor of specialist books.

A few customers perused the clean shelves, flipping pages in a particular text or enjoying a cup of coffee at the circular reading tables.

Casting a cursory glance at the books nearby, Harry saw subjects such as *Aviation*, *Information Technology*, *Creative Writing*, and *Physics*. Not what he needed, so he approached the Muggle at the register. She had a computer so maybe she could search for him.

As he approached her, Harry felt a vague sense of familiarity. She was blonde, lithe and just by looking at her creased frown as she read a thick book behind the counter, he could tell she probably spent more time in books than she did in the real world. Harry, for some reason, knew how that felt and admired it.

But still, despite all of that, he still felt as if he knew her. She smiled warmly when he approached, put her book down and asked politely,

“How can I help you?”

Attached to her blouse on the collar was a white nametag, and upon that was written the woman’s name. *Sarah...* it struck another cord in Harry’s memory. He knew this woman from somewhere and *somewhen*.

It was Ethan that recognised her first. *Sarah*, he said. *Sarah Wingfield. A woman who came with you in the early days – who died in a dark creature attack. She was a nurse, in the world where Allarius attacked you in force. She saved your life once – spraying a vampire with a fire extinguisher when you were too weakened to attack.*

Harry remembered – Ah, he remembered. Sarah Wingfield the blonde nurse he had allowed to come with him across universes. Here she was now – not the one he had known, but her just the same.

“How can I help you?” Sarah asked.

Harry blinked and dragged himself out of painful thoughts and bitter memory. “I... I need a book on ancient Egyptian... fairytales,” Harry said, somewhat lamely. Fate weaved an odd pattern, even when he thought he was beyond it things that were and was that had affected his life found a way of resurfacing in the battle torn webbing of Existence.

Sarah Wingfield was one such oddity. There were no coincidences in the grand plan, the Great Game – she was here to help him yet again.

“Oh, that’s an obscure one,” Sarah smiled and began to type quickly on the keyboard before her. Harry could see the computer screen flicker and change but it was meaningless to him. “But I like a challenge. Search will probably take a few minutes....”

“I’m happy to wait,” he said, not unkindly.

Sarah continued to type, her fingers blazing across the keys, and occasionally smiled up at him. Once she wore a bemused frown, as if

she had recognised him for a moment, but then she shook her head and said, "What's your interest in this subject? Most kids your age prefer surfing to four thousand year old fairytales."

Harry shrugged, and for the first time noticed the small pin attached to Sarah's collar. It was metal but it was fashioned in the shape of a white rose. A green stem and a shiny silver bud, reflecting the beam lights overhead and glinting into Harry's eyes.

"Curiosity," Harry replied. "I like that rose pin – where'd you get it?"

Sarah blinked and looked down to her collar. "What this....? The rose... I got this... I..." She looked up at him, frowning now. "I don't remember where I got this," she said, chuckling. "Isn't that odd?"

Harry shook his head. "Not to me," he whispered, just as the computer went *beep!*

"Ah, here we go," Sarah said, tapping a few more keys. "We have three books that match your criteria. None of them are specifically fairytales. One is mythology which I suppose amounts to the same thing. Another is a few short stories about how the pyramids were built, and the last details the belief in Ra, the Sun God... I think the mythology one is probably your best bet. Here, I'll show you where to find it."

"Thank you," Harry said, rubbing his scar absently. The pain in it hadn't lessened any yet, but now it ignited and rippled across his head and down his neck. It felt like a deep and powerful electric shock. Again, he almost fell... but the counter was there to steady him.

Be ready, Ethan warned. I think he may be testing the scar link to find you, and attack.

I know, Harry replied with a tired sadness. *God, do I know....*

"Excuse me," Sarah said as he followed her. She had been glancing at

him out of the corner of her eye and now seemed to have spotted something. "But you look awfully familiar. Have we met before?"

"Possibly," he answered. "I've done a lot of travelling in my time – we may have crossed paths before now."

Crossed threads in the web of Time, of Space, died another life and walked another dream.

Sarah reached up onto a shelf within the ancient history section, scanning the titles there before pulling down a thick colourful book about as heavy as a truck. Harry quickly took it off her, as she stumbled under its weight.

"Thanks," she breathed. "Of course it'd be the heaviest book in the store."

Harry smiled. "I'll take it," he said.

"You're really into this old folklore stuff then?"

"Passing interest really," he shrugged.

Back at the register, Sarah scanned the book and Harry paid three hundred and fifty dollars for it. For lack of a bag strong enough to carry it in, Harry just carried it underarm and said goodbye to a woman that, for some reason, was fated to help him in small ways now and then.

Perhaps there was some connection with her he was just not seeing, but if it was important then that was just too bad. He was too tired these days to care about these small quirks of Fate, these linked threads in his life. He exited the store without another glance at Sarah Wingfield, and left her alive this time.

Down the road Harry sat down at one of the tables of a restaurant he had passed earlier in the sun. It was a cloudless day, and the sun was high in the eastern sky as he dropped the heavy mythology book on the

intricately patterned white table. It only took a minute for a serving waiter to arrive, and he ordered a large coffee, black, and a piece of chocolate cake.

Scar still burning, Harry ran his fingers across the cover before flipping right back to the index on page three thousand and twenty seven;

Ancient Egyptian Mythology

A Comprehensive Study of a Great People.

Dr. Simon Allen; BSC; PHD.

The index was alphabetical and Harry quickly flicked through to 'D' and almost immediately found the word he was looking for.

Darkslayer – p1605

Hermione's mother had set him on this path now. She had given him the knowledge he needed to find what could possibly be the biggest secret of his life – and the salvation of time and space. *The Hand of God*, she had said, and didn't remember much more beyond that. Her studies were nineteen years ago, and she hadn't majored in these Egyptian fairytales... but it had been enough.

Hand of God... Angered the demons... blocked the Sun and fought the darkness... an orphan boy... hero of the people.... Vague and incomplete sentences were all Mrs Granger could recall.

His cake and coffee arrived and, as his scar bit at his mind, Harry turned to page 1605 and read what could have been the most important story ever written. An almost surreal calm descended over the Boy Who Lived as his eyes darted from word to word, line to line... time stretched around him and everything else ceased to matter.

This is what he read;

The following story appeared in Ancient Egypt at about 3000BC, and

formed what could have been the basis for many of today's great religions. It speaks of a man – a man who became a hero all across the land for fighting the darkness that had blinded the Sun God, Ra, who we know from previous pages was considered to be the Creator of life and the universe.

This Darkslayer, as he became known, was raised to be the Right Hand of God and to serve his Lord for all eternity, as translated from hieroglyphics discovered underneath the sands at Cairo in 1925. An alternate translation suggests that this man was not human, and was in fact Ra Himself destroying the Evil that had crippled Him.

Either translation is prone to error and, at this point in time, nothing further has been uncovered to settle this dispute over the Darkslayer origin, a dispute which has raged quite fiercely among the elite of the academic community for decades.

It is my belief that the Darkslayer was indeed human, and it is that translation which is written below.

What followed next was a story not written in the conventional text, but put together from the dozens of pictograms – hieroglyphics – used by the people of the time, and translated into English. As such, it didn't flow too smoothly....

Ra was blinded by a great wave of Darkness, casting all lands into suffering and despair... A man rose to fight the Darkness that bound Ra, the Sun, and although he was a poor orphan, he had a will of strength harder than any of the Gods...

He crossed many worlds and fought many dangers, spawned by that same Evil which held his beloved Creator... the man became known as the Darkslayer, for he wielded powers of the Sun – was graced with gifts by Ra to free Him... and the legions of the Destroyers, of Evil, were cast back into the abyss under his rage....

A hero to the people, the Darkslayer climbed twilight to fight some

unimaginable final battle before the captive Sun, and free Ra from his prison and return Light to the lands... and hope.

For this battle the Darkslayer commanded the souls of the dead, calling them to fight from the Underworld which was broken without Ra's Light. An army of humans... strengthened by the convictions of the Darkslayer also fought their own battle in the Great Desert, against demons and worse....

The Darkslayer fought across the stream of time, in the vastness of a great boundary that separated all of the worlds Ra had created. He fought with the fury of his people, of humans, and in time came to battle the heart of Evil, on the Plains of Twilight.

A battle that shook the heavens and almost undid all of Ra's creation was fought then, and the Darkslayer came close to death himself. For Ra was weakened from holding His creation together, and time with everything in it slipped through the hands of the Darkslayer....

His swords, twin blades of blue fire, smote the sky and called down a rain of fiery destruction upon the beast that had imprisoned Ra and stolen the Light. It shattered the worlds, burnt away the fabric upon which Ra had painted his Universes, and the End was upon the people...

All hope had faded now, the Darkslayer stood finally before Ra's captor and he was bereft of power... of the strength to carry on. He dreamt of nothing now but his lost love, and the normal life he had forsaken for this...

He was only human, after all.

Battle scarred and at the end of his life, the Darkslayer had no strength left, for Ra had not seen this End. His quest now rested on the edge of his sword...

Underneath the pyramids this story covered several walls and took many years to translate. It was incomplete when it was discovered in 1925 – the wall was half chiselled and painted, as if some great cataclysm had stopped work on this tale before it could be finished. Many believe it was the Ten Plagues of Egypt, others that the story itself was never finished.

Experts have agreed that it was a great Seer who transcribed this story onto the walls beneath Cairo, but further information on this aspect of the lost society has so far eluded even the most adventurous explorers. One would hope that in the future a completed telling of this story may be found.

The coffee was lukewarm when Harry finally looked up from the book, his eyes misty and deeply troubled. This story, this tale of a man called the Darkslayer, had been written five thousand years ago in a far away corner of the world... by a Seer. A Seer could interpret visions of the future, glimpses of what could be.

Did it mean what he thought it meant....

I'd put my money on what you're thinking, Ethan whispered. It makes too much sense not to be true...

But if it is.... Harry whispered, *if it is!*

If it is then you were born to fight a Holy Crusade against Evil itself and free the bindings that have somehow ensnared the God that supposedly created everything. His own Creation is supposed to save him from something that He may or may not have created. Evil....

Had a powerful Seer in Egypt witnessed his life five thousand years ago? Was this story not so much a story, as a prophecy of his life up to this point?

That rung with too much truth to be ignored.

Taking a bite of his cake, Harry chuckled as he realised that of all the places in Existence that he imagined this life altering revelation to be, it wasn't here. His scar was still burning, but then a moment later it stopped as if it had never been – the pain simply vanished and in its place a seeping cold numbed the inflammation in his mind.

Harry sighed with relief and then tore out the pages of the mythology book that he had just read. Folding them and placing them in his pocket he stood up, dropping coins onto the table for the cake and coffee. He left the book and turned away from the restaurant back onto the sidewalk.

A few steps later and Harry hit the ground hard as an explosion suddenly ripped through the centre of the road and the traffic, tossing half a dozen cars and a bus like feather light rag dolls out in a large booming radius. The flames from the initial explosion spread fast – they were purple – and grew into a swirling monolith of heat and energy.

Cars and debris flew over Harry and then once again screams of the dying reached his ears. It was a sound he knew all too well.

A sound that was soon drowned out by the rush of fire and crashing, twisting metal. Dozens of people died as a large city bus spun into the side of a skyscraper, shattering the mass of glass and skidding across the building's foyer, wiping out those not quick enough to dodge the wall of metal.

The purple tower of fire roared high up into the sky, a mile high into the sky and enveloped half of the street. It swirled and grew, twisting metal and flesh into its being. Tendrils of thick purple fire lashed out from its base and whipped through concrete and cars, people and trees alike.

Harry rolled fast off the sidewalk and over the curb onto the road. Had he stayed where he was he would have been trampled by the seething mass of humanity that was now fleeing, desperate to survive. Basic instinct had taken over – run, and run hard.

“*Potter...*” a silky smooth voice seemed to reverberate up and down the vast column of fire, and Harry didn’t hesitate to respond to that.

Standing on his own two feet, he moved like the wind, dodging the flaying tentacles that seemed to sense him and hone in on his position. Jumping over flaming wreckage and already a burning corpse or two, Harry dived back and forth under the whiplashes of the purple fire.

The purple fire creation grew and more and more tendrils of destruction sprung from it, until it resembled a towering rod marred with hundreds of thin blazing tentacles that whipped around it as fast as the eye could see – tearing into the high rise buildings, shattering so much glass that it rained a blizzard of the sharp fragments.

And still the purple flames grew.

Voldemort, he growled, not needing the renewed burning in his scar to know that the Dark Lord had conjured this monstrosity somehow.

“VOLDEMORT!”

He’s not here, Ethan whispered. *Look fast, stay alive!*

Large chunks of concrete, of building, rained down with the glass and Harry was a blur in between them as he pushed himself to his limit in avoiding the dangerous shower of debris. A moment later and his palms blazed with all the fury of his power. He cast a dome shield around himself and took a diving run at the base of the purple tower of fire.

Entire buildings in this city had been gutted and hundreds had died as Harry, shielded by his strength, jumped into the thick flames of the fire and was immediately shrouded in the purple heat. The force of the magic propelled him up through the tower, through the monolith of fire at a tremendous speed until he was expelled nearly six thousand feet above the city at the tip of the furious blaze.

Unburnt and yet smoking slightly, Harry growled and spun in the air,

calling both of his swords into his hands. His palms already shone with his ethereal power, and when he clasped his hands around the sword handles that same power raced up the length of the blades – a blue power....

My fury, he thought.

Still spinning high in the sky, Harry turned now with purpose and beheld the still growing and writhing purple bane that Voldemort had conjured somehow – with the power Harry had had torn from him. More of those deadly tendrils struck at him and he heard insane laughter in his mind and wasn't sure if it was his or Voldemort's.

It may have been both.

Swinging the blades expertly despite the wind buffeting him and the gravity that was now bearing down upon him, Harry cut through three of the tendrils, fusing his blue power over and into the now cauterised wounds inflicted on the flexible shafts of purple flame.

The tentacles affected by his blue power seemed to scream, shudder and then explode in a star of sharp fiery fragments that rocketed through the air in all directions. Harry spun and avoided the worst of them, but from the three separate explosions dozens of shards flew so he was bound to be hit.

One cut through the fabric of his jeans and embedded itself deep in his leg. The heat of it burnt the wound closed and there was no bleeding.

It burnt and hurt amazingly though.

Another few fragments grazed his arms and one scraped across his neck, again leaving a scarred burn that didn't bleed. Harry gritted his teeth as he spiralled through the sky, heading back towards the tip of the monolith of flame, his blades still alight and shining blue.

He ploughed into the fire at great speed, holding his swords before him and tore back down to the earth, eating through the purple fire,

destroying it – cutting it in half and wrenching it apart. A blazing blue trail followed him and he sliced the tower of destruction in half, the inertia and resistance of Voldemort's spell slowing his fall.

He felt the Dark's Lord glee turn to silent fury as he landed back on the city street, upon a pile of rubble that had once been a six storey apartment block, and as the column of fire, now rent in two, fell away either side, blue power spreading through it until, like its many tendrils, it exploded into a million jagged fragments.

Harry shielded himself and glared up at the terrible destruction, dozens of fiery hot needles impacting against his unbreakable shield. He knelt on one knee, as a shard of liquid fire was still embedded in his leg. He removed that now, first putting his left hand sword away, and pulling the accursed spike from his flesh.

Screaming from the pain, the wound now bleeding, Harry took a good look around at the destruction that had been caused within five small minutes.

A good portion of this city, its tallest buildings, had been destroyed – lashed and broken. There were no screams now, only alarms and distant explosions.

A great cloud of black smoke rose up into the sky above the city, hanging before the sun, and his sword gleamed almost crimson – a blade of blood. A butcher's tool.

"This world is doomed," Harry whispered, no longer standing alone on the pile of shaky rubble. Ethan stood next to him, silent and thoughtful. Beneath their feet hundreds of people lay dead.

"Oh no," Ethan said. "We haven't yet begun to fight, Potter – remember that."

Harry was silent for a long time as the sun faded further with the rising dust cloud, and black smoke from thousands of separate fires littered

across the proud and now battle lost city obscured the blue sky.

The Darkslayer sighed then, "Oh... God," he breathed. "I don't see a way out of this one. This'll be the death of us."

Ethan chuckled and turned to face him, his eyes maddening. "Nor do I," he grinned. "And when it happens we'll go down swinging... okay?"

Harry walked forward a few steps, dragging the tip of his sword against the broken stone behind him. This battle could scarcely be called that. It was a brawl between himself and the Dark Lord. The real fight – the one that only one of them would walk away from.... that fight would probably destroy a lot more than half a city.

"Yes, my friend," Harry spoke to Ethan. "In the end we'll die standing tall."

It was then, and it was for the last time, that Harry began to weep.

Weakened, near death, Godric Gryffindor – a Guardian – continued his journey across the vastness of the Boundary. Every second brought him closer to the gateway he could use to enter his old world... closer to Harry Potter.

But he began to fear that he wouldn't make it. So far he had been attacked eight times by Destroyer patrols, and his strength was at an end.

He feared he was mortally wounded. Only by escaping briefly into the mortal universes had he survived so far, entering worlds nearby this section of the Boundary.

There had been no sign of any other Guardians, and Gryffindor began to fear that he was the last. No, he knew he couldn't be the last... but one of a few survivors. The Destroyer attack had been swift... vicious... merciless. Small pockets of resistance probably continued across

Existence, but there wasn't time to reach them.

Never enough time....

What can Harry Potter do now....? *Gryffindor despaired.* What can anyone do?

Everything he had believed in and dedicated eternity to had been ravished and torn away. All he had now was hope in a boy that wasn't sane the last time they had met... a boy that was mortal.

The Darkslayer!

It was hope enough.

But of course there was no way that Gryffindor could know that the largest army ever seen was also converging on Harry Potter's world. An army of Destroyers, gathering its strength from all the corners of the Boundary, abandoning the mortal worlds they had conquered to fight the Darkslayer. Bringing all manner of dark creatures from those worlds with them to ravage the final refuge of the Light.

All the pieces were moving now, the Game approaching its end. Whether it would end in fire wasn't now the question... the only question now was how much of Existence wouldn't....

Albus Dumbledore was breathing heavily when he exited the pensieve Harry had sent him and landed back in his chair at Hogwarts. He shook, he shuddered and a single tear streamed down his cheek and into his bushy grey beard.

Dear Merlin, he thought. Harry....

The truth in this basin of memory was terrible, unforgivable... what force could allow something so torturous to occur to the young man.... What

God or deity would allow Harry to suffer so?

One that didn't exist!

No, that wasn't right, Albus reminded himself. One could not blame God and not believe in Him at the same time.

Fawkes, sensing his companion's pain, sang softly and sadly – trying his best to strengthen the aging Headmaster's heart and soul.

"I've made some mistakes in my time, Fawkes," Dumbledore managed, his hands still shaking as he glanced with a still growing horror at the silvery memory. "But nothing worse than this...."

Dumbledore recalled the battle of Hogsmeade in March, when Harry had disappeared. If he had made a greater effort to keep the lad at Hogwarts, then none of this would have happened. Harry would still have his youth, would still be mostly whole. He wouldn't have lost his mind in a hellish battle with a demon of pure evil!

Breaking down, Dumbledore held his head in his hands. It had been a trying few days, spent mostly in the pensieve but worsened by reports of Voldemort disturbing yet more corpses from their resting place. This time in France. The Muggle world was petrified, confused and angry.

War was brewing on many fronts.

And Dumbledore now knew that it wasn't his place to lead the magical world against Voldemort. He had been so sure in himself, so sure he could guide Harry... and now that was gone. He had lost his trust. The boy... no, the man, was fighting a battle he had fought for a century – doing it the only way he knew how. And Dumbledore, like everyone else now, was merely a spectator.

Harry was powerful. By God, Harry was powerful. He was also the only thing stopping Voldemort from destroying this world. Tom wouldn't chance his power against Harry's – not in open conflict until he was sure

he could win.

And that meant marshalling an army the likes of which the world had never seen. An army of the dead, of Inferi and vampires. Death Eaters and Dementors. A terrible force that would wash away all that was good, and decent.... and pure.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Darkslayer, the Lord of Twilight... was all that stood between the world and a very dark future.

Dumbledore knew he had made many mistakes trying to control and guide Harry, too many. But maybe now that he knew the truth he could set about righting a few of them. The least he could do would be to throw his support, and Britain's, behind him in the International Community.

He was an unknown entity in the International Confederation. His Rose Banner and the one of Death were still fused into the Seat of Merlin, and that scared the IC as much as the fact that Harry had been in control of Australia for the last few weeks. If he could take over one Ministry with just a handful of men and women, then what was to stop him taking over another one?

He had been declared an enemy of peace in many circles, was fighting for a world that wanted to hang him for protecting them, and had issued that proclamation eight days ago calling for soldiers to join his army in Australia.

That was another thing the Boy Who Lived was doing. He was really the only one who knew what was coming, what Voldemort planned to do, and was fighting back. Everything else would fall if it wasn't for Harry – would have fallen a long time ago.

Reports from the island continent were sketchy at best, as the staff of the Ministry were routinely interrogated with truth serum and spells for links to Death Eaters, but even the lowest estimates put Harry's army at two

thousand men and women. The highest even put it at ten thousand people, which was a bit absurd.

Then again, this was Harry Potter. A symbol for the Light and the only one to have ever defeated Lord Voldemort.

The future does not exist....

Dumbledore held the small note Harry had written him and gazed at those words with a renewed understanding. Harry had seen entire worlds fall, fail, die. He knew it could happen here, but that it didn't have to....

Yes, Dumbledore had decided – he would convince Arthur to throw the United Kingdom's support behind Harry, and then renew ties with the young man. Before his birthday on the thirty first, he hoped to be allies with him again. With any luck they could get him back on their side....

Dumbledore rose from his chair and headed over to the fireplace. "Grimmauld Place," he whispered, throwing down a handful of floo powder. The old man disappeared in a blur of green flames.

It was a well known fact to his friends that Harry didn't sleep more than three hours – and that was only on a good night. It wasn't the fact that he wouldn't sleep more than three hours; it was the terrifying fact that he *couldn't* sleep more than three hours that made Ginny want to cry.

She had healed his leg when he stumbled in earlier that evening, and eventually after much nagging she and Ron and Hermione had squeezed the truth out of him. Voldemort had tried to destroy him – hadn't succeeded, hadn't even come close – but thousands of people had got in the way.

Harry had witnessed thousands of deaths today – very possibly the only survivor in a tormented and twisted use of magic that had torn apart a

city on the western coast of this country. He had been understandably upset, more so than she expected from what she knew of him now.

But then maybe it had finally begun to add up for Harry.... maybe all the pain had cracked his soul and resolve and now the terror was seeping out and hurting him.

His nightmares were truly awful – beyond understanding – and it was that which only allowed him a few hours of tortured sleep a night. Ginny seriously wondered if Harry was the most abused human in all of time. How can something as simple as buying a book turn into a massacre?

Voldemort was the answer to that.

It was early in the morning, one or two o'clock, and Harry and Ginny were half asleep together on the large sofa that looked out upon the sea in his sitting room. Only now it was dark, and a severe thunderstorm that had appeared out of nowhere was lashing the window with sheets of rain. Very frequently, a fork of lightning lit up the cloudy sky and the choppy ocean. The thunder was near deafening.

Ginny lay down on half the sofa, her legs stretched out onto the coffee table, and Harry lay down restlessly with his head in her lap. She gently ran her hands through his hair, the both of them drifting in and out of troubled sleep.

They had been like that for a few hours now – silently finding calm in each other's company. Harry was tired, Ginny knew, terribly tired. All the weight of everything he had fought and carried was grinding him into the dirt, everything he had to fight without rest.

She recalled getting out of bed three hours ago and finding Harry awake, unsurprisingly, by the window nearby watching the storm.

Ginny didn't know why she awoke suddenly in the night, but when she did she felt awful. All ragged and stretched and ultimately bereft of warmth. It was cold when she got out of bed, so she pulled on her robe

over her pyjamas and put on a pair of socks and slippers.

Thunder and rain pounded down upon the house. It was so loud, she thought.

Stepping out of her room into the large sitting room, she saw his silhouette against the distant window, marked only briefly in a flash of powerful lightning. It was Harry, she knew instinctively, and he wasn't okay.

He'd been distant when he came back earlier that evening, and all the fight seemed to have drained out of him. He was pale and shivering, his eyes red with tears, and he was soaked through to the bone. He had added a few new scars to the collection somehow – one on his neck, a few on his arms and another in his leg.

She, Ron, and Hermione, had healed him as best they could, spoken to him and made him eat, and then he had fallen asleep. They had gone to bed soon after, weary from the magical exhaustion of powering crystals all day, and had assumed Harry would sleep through the night.

And so, it was only a moment later, that Ginny found Harry alone on the floor by the window, his arms wrapped around his legs....

Ginny's heart broke at the sight of him. He was rocking back and forth on his heels. The pain etched into his face was enough to rattle the strongest heart. He wanted to wail, to scream... Harry wanted to die, and was fighting those urges with every fibre of his being.

For lack of another else to do, Ginny had gotten down onto the floor with him and just held him as he thrashed and finally let it all out. He was battling with himself, obviously furious at showing what he thought was a weakness, and feeling relieved that some of the burden was falling away.

After some time, Ginny had managed to walk him over to the sofa...

And they were there now. Harry was dozing, frowning even in his sleep, and mumbling incoherently as Ginny ran her hand through his hair

soothingly.

She loved him, she did, and anything that tried to get in their way could burn for all she cared right now. He was tired, she knew, tired of it all.

“Great men should dream of normal lives...” she whispered. “Not of monsters.”

Harry stirred. “...did you say something?” he croaked.

“Go back to sleep, Harry,” she said. He was still frowning, hadn’t opened his eyes, but he nodded and nestled back down into the sofa. His breathing was shallow, his muscular arms scarred, but he seemed to be sleeping now.

What did the future hold for them? She didn’t know, didn’t think any force across all of Existence knew how this would end.

Ginny did know though, as she gazed down lovingly at Harry, stroking his hair, that he shouldn’t die. Not after all he had fought for... it wouldn’t be fair for him to die. What kind of justice was that?

No, Harry should not die... or... or... A single thought swam across Ginny’s mind and she held the Boy Who Lived close, snuggling down until they were near inseparable.

Or...

At the very least, Harry shouldn’t die alone.

[Chapter 16 – The Blood Rose](#)

A hero is no braver than an ordinary man,

but he is braver five minutes longer.

~~Emerson

“*Minister* Potter,” Maggie Thorn said, her voice laced with contempt at the title. “Albus Dumbledore is here to see you.”

Harry, sitting at his desk in the Australian Ministry with a large stack of papers and plans before him, glanced up neutrally at the woman he had chosen to replace the late Stephen Cornwall. Maggie Thorn – the senior Auror. She was old, and grey, and would have retired earlier this year if not for the escalating war in Britain.

As such, she did not appreciate the tactics Harry had used to usurp the position of Minister from its old holder. As far as he knew the previous minister had vanished, and good riddance to him. No, Harry privately thought that Thorn was upset that he had so easily broke through the defences she had help implement in the Ministry.

No matter... Dumbledore was here.

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly, stretching his neck until it cracked quite satisfyingly. “See him in, please, Mrs Thorn.” It cost nothing to be polite. Maggie Thorn nodded abruptly, her thin mouth growing even thinner and her eyes shadowed with displeasure underneath a spiky short amount of grey hair.

Thorn left the room and it seemed to grow decidedly warmer, as Harry signed a new load of orders with a quick flick of his quill across the parchment before him. Something about transferring galleons into the international stock market. He didn’t read these things unless they pertained to the war. *His* war.

“I wonder what Dumbledore wants?” Ginny said, seated beside him in a smaller chair he had conjured. Dressed in a white blouse and dark jeans, Harry thought Ginny’s hair sparkled as she moved in the light. She seemed so light... and carefree... innocent, even. No, that wasn’t right –

Ginny had lost her innocence to a diary years ago.

Voldemort had broken her childhood.

"I think he's come to reforge old friendships," Harry replied, with only a small, sad smile. "We were both wrong in a lot of things... he knows that now."

"The pensieve," Ginny sighed. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Harry nodded. "Oh, yes...."

It had been two days since the disaster on the western coast, two days since a city was decimated with a wave of Voldemort's hand. Harry knew he had been way too slow in responding, though really what more could he have done? And the dead numbered thousands as the clean up operation began.

It didn't matter really, when the Destroyers broke through – and even Harry wasn't powerful enough to prevent that, especially since they were allied with Voldemort – the entire world would become one large battlefield. With any luck, when all was said and done, a small remnant of humanity would survive.

Right now that was the best Harry could do. He did not see another option that wouldn't result in planet wide destruction. And there was a strong chance of that happening anyway.

Vaguely, he found himself hoping that Sarah Wingfield – the nurse/bookseller – had survived the destruction of two days ago. His mind told him it was impossible, but his heart hoped she had somehow survived. That was of no consequence now though, as Dumbledore strolled into his office, robes ever vibrant and beard tucked into his belt.

"Harry," he said, inclining his head with more respect than Harry had expected. "Please... forgive me, I couldn't have known."

Harry blinked and stood up, moving around the desk and staring into Dumbledore's eyes – an unreadable expression on his face. Stony calm emanated from his features, the scar under his eye twitching slightly with the skin. "You can leave us, Mrs Thorn," he told his deputy minister. "Thank you."

Maggie Thorn was all too happy to leave, only nodding to Dumbledore as she left with the storm cloud that seemed to follow her around. Harry couldn't like the woman. He respected her, but then over the years he had respected a number of his worst enemies as well.

Harry wasn't quite eye level with Dumbledore, an inch or so shorter, but his physical presence more than made up for his lack of height. Harry's posture, the way he stood, how he looked, and the way he looked commanded a lot of respect. It was clear to Ginny, who observed the two of them, where the power lay.

Staring into the old man's eyes, Harry saw regret, pain, anguish and even fear. But there was also determination, a small twinkle of hope, and of renewed excitement. Dumbledore expected Harry to end this war for the world, and Harry would, but the old man didn't know about the Destroyers...

Still, there was time for that later.

"You couldn't have known," Harry managed. "You couldn't have... no one could have." He held out his arm, smiling for the first time that day. The twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes suddenly flared magnificently as he grasped Harry's forearm tightly.

Harry took Dumbledore's and a silent apology for the wrongs from both of them was exchanged. They were equals, not in power but in morality. Two men, both adept at manipulating the world for their own, somewhat selfless aims. Two men who would try and hold the world together as it fell apart.

Though ultimately that was Harry's job.

Voldemort sat upon his throne and before him knelt five of his most loyal Death Eaters. Humans, his human servants who had done their part in the past to assure his rise to power now. A few of the small number of humans who would survive the coming apocalypse.

Garbed in the black robes of the Death Eaters, Voldemort's crimson eyes burned with deadly patience as, one by one, the three men and two women swore their allegiance once more. He had to be sure, binding them on their magic, for what he was about to do would have consequences that could spiral out of control.

That didn't matter though, in the long run, Potter had to be defeated.

Voldemort's eyes flared at the thought of Harry Potter, and the five Death Eaters didn't see that – but they felt it, kneeling lower into the dirty damp stone until their noses brushed the floor, trying very hard not to quiver.

Voldemort briefly recalled the last seventeen years, skipping over his time as a disembodied spirit – clinging to life because death wasn't permitted – and all the times he had met or had been thwarted by the so called Darkslayer. The times were numerous, some in ways Potter probably didn't even know of, and yet he had always been there to combat him.

Opposites, Voldemort thought, *powerful equals....* He could not be allowed to live, not any longer.

“Rise....” the Dark Lord hissed, and the air seemed to moan and fail.

Without hesitation the five Death Eaters rose to their feet, still keeping their heads bowed reverently – fearfully – in the presence of their master.

“Lucius,” Voldemort continued. “Are you and your son ready to accept a gift greater than any other? Are you and Draco prepared to seek out Harry Potter and stop his interference once and for all?”

Lucius Malfoy stepped forward, nudging Draco forward with him. Of equal heights, the two Malfoy’s looked a lot alike. Sleek blond hair and cold merciless eyes – father and son. They had both seen and done things that were beyond redemption.

“Of course, my lord,” Lucius said, strongly and truthfully.

“And the rest of you...?” Voldemort whispered.

Bellatrix Lestrange stepped forward next to Lucius and nodded just as strongly, just as gravely. Next to her was Alecko Carrow, a blonde haired witch with a lopsided smile and sharp piercing eyes that saw more than most people thought. A Death Eater who had escaped Azkaban and rejoined Voldemort since. To Alecko’s left was her brother, Amicus Carrow. A lumpy wizard with the same eyes and sadistic smile as his sister.

The five of them were the Death Eaters Voldemort could trust to a greater extent than any other. They had been with him since the beginning and would soon see the end. He was about to entrust them with great power, and strength enough between the five of them to challenge and maybe even defeat Harry Potter.

Of course Potter would probably annihilate them, but Voldemort had to try something. Too many variables and unknown factors were working their way into his plans, least of all this alliance with the Destroyers – which was tentative at best. Those creatures were evil, single minded in their obsession to destroy Potter, and could possibly turn on him after the boy was dead.

Unless he forced them to submit somehow. Their advantage was their vast numbers – billions, Voldemort had been told, billions massing

outside of this world to wage war against one man, Potter.

At Stonehenge Voldemort had watched Potter destroy one of them with ease, barely even blinking his eyes. If he were to create a strengthened army of his own, he could use the Destroyers to wipe out the defences of this world and then destroy them himself.... after that, well, the universe was open to him for eternity.

They were all problems that could not be fixed now however, so Voldemort stood, his throne seat layered with frost and the air freezing around him.

The faint light from the distant torches lining the walls seemed to wilt further.

His palms and arms were suddenly wreathed in fire – crimson power that spun in spiralling waves between the tips of his skeletal fingers, forming a sphere in the centre that did not so much emanate light, than destroy what little of it there already was.

Hovering now before the Dark Lord, the crimson sphere twisted and wrenched against the space in the air before splitting into five equal portions – lengthening to become pointed. They thrummed on the air, turning and pointing towards the Death Eaters. The five men and women looked equally frightened and excited.

Like arrows, swift and true, the crimson spikes shot through the air and struck the black robed figures fiercely, sending two of them flying backwards and the remaining three to the floor in pain, grasping at their chests as the spike wormed its way in. They didn't bleed – there was no blood, but the eyes of each and every one of them began to glisten red.

Tears of power, it could've been blood now, flowed down the five equally horrified and pain ridden faces. *What was happening?* They didn't know, didn't even suspect, but that didn't change the fact that the consequences would be dire.

Draco Malfoy screamed, at least he thought he did. In his ears was a

tremendous roar, like wind rushing through a crevice and battering against the sides of his mind – threatening to burst his eardrums and end his life.

But it didn't end his life.

A moment later, when the pain subsided and he was left with a deep burn mark on his chest, Malfoy had never felt more alive. He could smell his own cooked flesh, but he could also smell the dirt on the ground, the power on the air. He could hear his heartbeat and his father's heartbeat. His sight, which had been poor in this eternally dark room, was now strong and unwavering.

"Thank you, my lord," Draco was the first to say, standing and feeling the power coursing through his veins, through his soul. He was soon echoed by the other four Death Eaters.

"You five have been trusted with the most important of tasks. Eliminate Harry Potter. I do not care how – bring me his head by sundown tomorrow or the penalty will be torture at my own hand."

Sundown tomorrow – that was about thirty six hours.

The loyal and now monumentally powerful servants of Lord Voldemort bowed, and quietly exited the room. Crimson power flickered across their eyes, twitched in their palms. They were the strongest witches and wizards on the planet in raw magical strength. Save Potter and the Dark Lord.

Will it be enough? Voldemort mused, swirling his hand through the smoke that was rising around his throne. *One of them alone will not match*

Potter, but five? Perhaps....

Lord Voldemort pondered that for some time, before turning his attention to other, darker, matters.

“And Voldemort has raised another five thousand soldiers from the grave in France. As it stands, we believe he may have somewhere between thirteen and eighteen thousand Inferi under his command.”

Harry and Dumbledore sat on opposite sides of his desk in his office at the Ministry. They had been speaking quite openly for about an hour now,

Dumbledore showing his new found respect for Harry’s leadership capabilities. It had taken one hundred years of memory to convince the old man, but he knew that Harry was all the world had now.

“Fifteen thousand say,” Harry mused, unconsciously swirling his hand in a small spinning motion. Voldemort was doing the same thing twelve thousand miles away. “That is insignificant alongside the vast army of Destroyers that could descend upon our planet at any moment.”

“These Destroyers,” Dumbledore said, twisting the word around in his mouth as if it were something distasteful. It was. “They can be killed.”

“I killed most of them once,” Harry shrugged. “They attacked Existence in the form of a single monster, a single demon.”

“Allarius,” Dumbledore shuddered, his eyes downcast and somewhat fearful. “You say you defeated most of them?”

Harry nodded but then sighed, glancing briefly to his right and at Ginny. She smiled reassuringly and urged him on. “I also recreated them, undid their destruction... Allarius died in the mortal worlds... I changed the mortal worlds. Hell, at Twilight I changed the canvas of Existence. I played God and it was as if I had never left this world all across Time and Space.”

“Ah,” Dumbledore sighed. “They were reborn again earlier in time. You didn’t defeat them.”

“Technically,” Harry shrugged. “But they remember that I did once, in another reality that I unmade. In a lot of places, mainly the Boundary, time can only flow forward or it doesn’t exist at all. Beings both light and dark remember the trail I blazed across time and existence.” Harry smiled slightly, grimly, and Dumbledore suppressed a shudder.

He wasn’t sure if Harry was entirely sane... but then, who would be after one hundred years of battling the worst creatures in all of Creation?

“So billions of these creatures are allied with the world’s most dangerous enemy ever,” Dumbledore whispered, leaning back in his chair and turning up his hands in a gesture Harry almost thought was defeat.

“And don’t forget the demons,” Harry said quietly. “There could be millions of them as well.”

“It seems Fate does not want us to free our world from oppression and terrorism,” Dumbledore blinked, stroking his beard. “You wouldn’t happen to be able to have a small chat with Fate, would you, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “We’re not on speaking terms. And anyway, what Fate decides is more of a rough guideline than a certainty. We, life, can change that web.”

“Is that true?”

Harry thought for a moment, tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. “I think... I think it might be,” he eventually said.

“And you, Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore turned to Ginny. “Do you believe we can save our world?”

Ginny nodded without hesitation. “I believe Harry can, Professor,” she said. “I believe Harry has to.”

If Harry can’t I will, Ethan mumbled. *I always do all the hard work anyway!*

Please, Harry replied – and to Dumbledore it appeared he was smiling at nothing. *I'm Batman in this relationship. You're my rebellious sidekick.*

Ethan snorted. *Yeah, okay, you're Batman, Harry.*

Don't tell anyone.

“What do you intend to do?” Dumbledore asked, unnerved slightly by Harry's pointless smile. He was unstable, he had to be, the Headmaster knew.

Cracking his knuckles and staring at a spot on the desk, Harry once again shrugged. “Half the time I have no idea what I'm doing,” he said, truthfully.

“Plus I've got to keep this badass image I've got going, and everyone knows that badass' live in the moment – don't make plans.”

Harry smiled at Dumbledore's expression and Ginny gasped. “Harry,” she said slowly, “did you just make a joke?”

Harry paused, speculated for a moment, and then nodded. “You know, I think I did....”

Ginny's eyes brightened and she smiled – she looked happy. “Are you feeling okay? I'd be careful, if I were you, another one might hurt after so long.”

Harry rolled his eyes and winked at her, feeling lighter for some reason. It was as if he had shed a great weight that he had carried so long he had forgotten he was carrying it.

“I do not think this discussion merits humour,” Dumbledore said, looking a tad angry. “You should take this more seriously, Harry.”

Harry's eyes flashed but he held his temper, not wanting to lose this lighter feeling he was riding. “You should never take life seriously,

Professor, none of us are getting out of it alive.”

Dumbledore stared for a moment and then, after frowning once, nodded. “Well put, my boy,” he said. “Lemon drop?”

From his robes Dumbledore pulled a small paper bag from his pocket and offered the Muggle sweets across the table to Harry and then Ginny. Harry declined but Ginny accepted one gratefully, sliding it into her mouth and wincing on the sourness.

“So where do we go from here?” the old man then asked, after slipping a lemon drop of his own between his teeth.

Harry thought for a moment. “I need crystals – crystals to power weapons to combat every enemy out there. I’ve lost count of how many there are but I’m sure they’re out there.”

Ginny raised her little finger and tapped it. “Voldemort,” she said, and raised another finger. “Dementors, Death Eaters, Vampires, Destroyers, Demons. I put the count at six.”

Harry shrugged. “What about werewolves?” He turned to Dumbledore. “Have many accepted the cure?”

“Every one on the register and some that have come forward since your cure was developed, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “Sadly, some may still serve Tom.”

Harry nodded – he had assumed the worst anyway. This wasn’t the worst yet, but it was damn near close.

Keep on rockin’, Potter, Ethan said. *You don’t play dice with the universe.*

Quoting Einstein now? Harry asked – he had read a lot at the Ways of Twilight. Decades worth of study that had seemed that long and yet also only a few seconds.

Ethan shrugged. *Einstein and I, we think alike. Great minds and all of that.*

"I said," Dumbledore raised his voice slightly, "I said what do you intend to do with the crystals, Harry?"

Harry blinked and fell out of his mind. "Put them in weapons," he said, thinking back to what had been said. "Muggle weapons, new weapons, and then put those weapons in the hands of my soldiers. I intend to wage a war with those crystals."

Dumbledore mused on that for a few minutes and then nodded. "Do you need more manpower to infuse these crystals with undiluted magic?"

"I do," Harry nodded. "I was hoping the British Ministry could provide it. Everyone here is stretched keeping the country running and the growing army supplied. Seven thousand magical recruits now – soon I'll start recruiting the Muggles. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny between them have charged two hundred and thirty crystals, but I need hundreds of thousands."

Dumbledore blinked, digesting that, before nodding. "Okay," he said. "Okay, I will speak to Arthur about that. We will be announcing our allegiance for you at the next Confederation meeting, by the way. I do apologise for not supporting you earlier."

"My banners still stuck in the Seat of Merlin?" he asked, with a small grin.

"They have been a source of frustration and uncertainty in every meeting since you placed them there," Albus said, shaking his head and grinning underneath his beard. "I'm... I am glad we are working together again, Harry. The world was looking terribly dark before."

"It isn't much lighter," Harry agreed. "And soon it's going to rain blood, but united we have a chance. A small chance, a small hope – but, for me at least, the odds have never been better."

Dumbledore stood as Harry did and they shook hands across the desk again. "May I ask, Minister Potter," the old man said, "what you intend to do about this army of Destroyers? Surely, you have some idea."

If he doesn't then we are doomed, Dumbledore thought simply. *Everything is – everything rested on Harry Potter*. That thought made Dumbledore feel oddly comforted.

Harry rolled his tongue across his bottom teeth, looked at nothing for a moment in thought, and then nodded. "Even the walls have ears, Professor," he grinned, "but I have an ace or two up these old sleeves. If worst comes to worst, I'll bring down this universe upon them and pick up the pieces later."

The tone of his voice said it was a joke, but his eyes said that it might actually be an option. *For Harry*, Dumbledore knew, *such a thing was an option*.

"We'll meet again soon," Harry said, letting go of Dumbledore's hand and moving over to take Ginny's. "I'll come to Britain, I think, and apologise to the Order for my actions when I was last at Grimmauld Place."

"Can you tell mum that Ron and I are well, Professor," Ginny asked. "And that we will be coming with Harry in a few days."

Dumbledore nodded, seeing the amazing connection between Harry and Ginny. Many forces across Existence may have tried to destroy Harry, may have searched fruitlessly for his weakness, but Dumbledore knew he was standing right next to her. Ginny Weasley was the only thing stopping Harry from giving up, but was also the one person who could destroy him.

It was a terribly fragile game that was now being played. One crack, one nudge, and the whole house of cards would come tumbling down.

It was with those thoughts that Dumbledore returned to the United Kingdom.

A few nights ago Harry had been a wreck after the events in the city of Perth, in which thousands of innocent bystanders had been killed.

It had been Ginny who helped him through that night when the walls of his life began to close in around him, when the pain and the *pointless* suffering began to claw at him in its strongest assault ever.

He had wept, he had cried, he had held himself as the nightmares appeared one by one before his eyes and threatened to devour him. Ginny had held his hand, whispered small nothings to calm him and stayed with him through the night until, by morning, the nightmares were gone.

Locked once again behind the barriers Harry had ceased to guard for just a moment.

But Ginny had pushed them back – Harry had merely closed and locked the gate.

“It’s your birthday a week on Thursday,” Ginny said, as the two of them walked hand in hand down the beach heading back towards the house. Harry had needed to stretch his aching muscles and joints, and a walk had done that. Ginny, of course, did not want to leave him. People died and

Harry lost it when he was on his own.

“Is it?” he smiled sadly. “Aye, it is. I’d forgotten....”

“Ron said you would,” she chided, shaking her head. “You’ll be of age in about a week – can use magic outside of Hogwarts and everything.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, about time as well.”

It was approaching noon and Harry knew he had to go to the Ministry then and sign the day's documents, make sure his army was being supplied and count the costs. He could wait a few more minutes however – his talk with Dumbledore yesterday had been productive enough.

“Do you want to come to the Ministry again?” he asked Ginny. “I was thinking of asking Ron and Hermione as well.”

“Can do,” Ginny nodded. “Nothing else to do this afternoon anyway. Haven't get the energy left to keep charging those crystals.”

A shipment of weapons had arrived, through the Twilight Guardians at the army base in the central desert of this country. From the British Prime

Minister, the man who had joint command of the Guardians, and was safely on Harry's side. He was increasingly frustrated about the grave robberies and attacks that were now flaring up across Europe as well, but there was little Harry could do about that.

In a few weeks his army might be able to begin patrolling major cities in the United Kingdom, and Australia – no other country would accept them, especially because of Harry's tactics used in the acquisition of his current Ministry. Soon enough he'd turn his attention on securing those countries, but not yet....

Ron and Hermione buttoned their cloaks around their necks and checked to make sure their wands were safe and secure in the holsters wrapped

around their wrists. Hand in hand, they walked over to Harry and Ginny who were talking quietly before the big glass window that looked out over the ocean in the sitting room.

Hermione thought Harry cut an impressive figure against that window, tall and intimidating as the sunlight shone around him, casting his skin in

an ethereal glow, whilst also being filtered through his dark hair. Even dressed in simple jeans and a shirt as he was, it didn't deter from the powerfully wrought image he possessed.

She thought briefly about her parents, who had needed to get away for a few days and were now up north in Darwin, staying in a hotel. They had told her that they were planning on returning to the UK soon, return to being dentists, and they hoped she would come with them. They asked her to come, they didn't tell her; knowing full well that with Harry she was caught up in something beyond their understanding. When they got back, Hermione knew she had to convince them to stay here – where it was safe.

"All set then?" Harry asked as they walked up to him. His eyes, always so cold and calculating, for a moment seemed warm and welcoming.

Hermione didn't shudder under his stare. She had been suppressing them around him these last few days. Whether he knew it or not Harry was terrifying at times, and Hermione suspected that he did know it but found it hard to be anything else. He had needed to be terrifying, hard, merciless, and unbreakable over the years. Now... now everyone wasn't an enemy, and he had to adjust to that.

"Sure are, Minister," Ron grinned, slapping Harry on the shoulder.

"Don't call me that...." Harry mumbled, facing the window. "Sounds way too formal. Alright then, everyone who's going get onboard. I'll Apparate us through all the wards."

Harry took Ginny's hand with his right and Hermione's hand with his left. Ron placed his hand on Harry's shoulder and a moment later – a second, the blink of an eye – he stood not in Harry's house, but in Harry's office.

Portraits of previous ministers glared down at Harry and the others. Ron saw a desk stacked with papers and a fireplace with empty ashy logs resting in it. There were a few chairs and a long leather sofa next to a set of cabinets and shelves stacked with books and a few unidentifiable

oddities.

Sitting in one of those chairs was a grey woman wearing a scowl and white Auror robes. She stood when she saw Harry and bowed her head in the smallest possible display of respect. "Minister," she said.

"Mrs Thorn," Harry replied, showing her much more respect than she did him. "What news of the world?"

Ron and Hermione followed Ginny's lead, as she had been here before, and went and sat on the black leather sofa sitting perpendicular to Harry's desk, which he purposefully strode around and sat down in his large chair.

"Nothing much to report save the usual," she scowled, not taking the seat Harry offered but remaining stood next to the door, her hands clasped behind her back. "Your army seems to have peaked at about seven and a half thousand recruits – we are supplying them as best we can given the surge but things are levelling out now."

"Excellent," Harry nodded.

"Your Twilight Guardians have begun training lieutenants to serve under them, and the man who calls himself Alpha One wished to see you – he wants you to talk to the recruits so far. He said, and I agree, that they can't be truly loyal to you because they have never seen you. Rebellion, treason or worse could follow if that rabble gets out of hand."

Harry shrugged. "That rabble is going to save the world. Anything else?"

"The International Confederation is meeting this Saturday," Thorn continued. "Australia currently has no ambassador, as you relieved the previous minister of his position, and Stephen Cornwall is no longer with us." Her voice wavered at the end there. Stephen had been her student for a time.

"Send someone to represent us – you choose," Harry replied. "Go

yourself, if you want. Let them know that my offer stands. They can hand over their forces peacefully or I will take them.”

Maggie Thorn looked at him for a long moment after that. “There have been a few Death Eater attacks in France,” she continued. “Fifty dead in an attack on the French Ministry.”

“The French can defend themselves,” Harry sighed. “But offer them a force of soldiers – five hundred strong – to defend their Ministry. Make sure they understand it is an offer, and that these soldiers will be ready in a few weeks.”

“As you wish,” Thorn inclined her head. “Nothing else new, Minister, save the reports on your desk. Will that be all?”

Harry nodded, reaching for a stack of papers. “Can you take Ron here down to the Auror offices and introduce him to the battle tacticians. He’s got a keen mind for that and is my War Councillor.”

Ron’s eyebrows almost disappeared under his fringe as Harry spoke and his jaw dropped. Maggie Thorn looked equally shocked, turning a critical eye on the flame-haired young man she had taken as nothing more than a teenager.

“Him?” she said. “Bit young, isn’t he?”

Harry grinned. “Young or not we can all still die in this war, Mrs Thorn. Ron here sees things differently than the rest of us.”

Thorn blinked and then, after a moment, nodded. “Very well – come with me, boy.”

“You can go as well if you like Hermione, Ginny. I’ll be doing nothing but signing these for an hour or two.” Harry opened a sleeve of documents that fell out onto the desk before him. “Despite everything that’s going to happen we’ve gotta keep the world turning.”

“I’ll stay,” Ginny said.

“I think I’ll go with Ron,” Hermione decided, standing up and following Ron and Maggie Thorn out of the door. “Be back soon then.”

Ginny pulled a smaller stool over to sit next to Harry after everyone else left and they talked quite normally for a few minutes as Harry scanned the parchment before him and then scrawling his signature in blue ink along the bottom, adding his seal of the white rose with a wave of his hand.

“Did you ever find out why white roses seemed so important?” Ginny asked.

Harry didn’t look up when he answered. With a shrug he said, “Never – just one of those things, I guess. Strangely fitting. Darkness takes black, Light takes white.”

“White roses grew around you sometimes, didn’t they? When you were sleeping you’d wake up and they’d be there. Do you know why?”

Harry shrugged again. There was a lot he didn’t know, a lot that even Twilight couldn’t answer. “Haven’t a clue. Part of the Darkslayer curse maybe. Why so interested?”

It was Ginny’s turn to shrug. “I think they’re important.... I just—just have a feeling.”

Harry paused and stopped writing to turn and look up at her, a small frown creasing his brow. His eyes were suspicious, but not of her, she knew, of something else.

“What?” she said, once his gaze had begun to grow uncomfortable.

Harry clicked his teeth together twice. “Nothing,” he said eventually. “Just wayward thoughts about eternity and forever. Here....”

Light flared in and around Harry's scarred hand and for a moment it was lost to sight. When it returned, a dew soaked white rose – thorny and just blooming, rested softly between his fingers. The bud grew and spread until the petals reached out as far as they'd go. He handed it to her.

"For protection," he said. "For luck... for my peace of mind. It's a powerful thing."

Ginny grinned and twirled the flower in her hand, drops of dew spun off it in spirals. It was real, alive, not an imitation of life – but life itself. Harry had created it... no, perhaps he'd pulled it from somewhere else on the planet. But she had never seen a rose like this before. It was flawless, seemed to sing in her hands, and made her feel warm.

"Where do you think red roses come into it all?" she mused a moment later.

Harry chuckled, a tad bitterly. "The blood rose," he said. "I don't want to know."

War perhaps, Ethan said. Black for death, white for life, red for all that's in between.

It's not out problem, Harry mumbled in his mind.

It is if your suspicions about Ginny are correct, he replied. *She's interested in the Roses... why?*

She saw it in the pensieve!

Is it more than that? Are you thoughts correct and is something beyond this world involving her? Making her feel these feelings?

Harry gritted his teeth. *If something is then that something will die. She's to be kept out of this.*

Spoken like the defiant hero you are....

"What do you want to do when this is all over, Harry?" Ginny asked.

Once again falling out of his thoughts, Harry blinked and realised he'd let ink stain the document before him in a big blue smudge. He charmed it away and wrote his signature quickly.

"I've never given it much thought," he replied honestly. "I don't... know, for a time I wasn't even sure it would ever be over. And who knows? I could stop it all this time but there could be a next time, and a time after that.... when would it end?"

It will never be over, Potter, not for you.

Ginny sighed patiently. "Given the chance, what would you like to do? You must have dreams, ideas for life."

Harry smiled and gave that some serious thought. "I suppose," he said carefully, "I suppose that if I had the chance I think writing might be a relatively peaceful occupation."

"Writing?"

"Stories are what make a universe, Gin, not atoms," he replied.

"So this saving the world thing is just a way of getting cash so you can write?"

Harry chuckled. "Something like that, I think."

Ginny tapped her lips in thought and grinned at Harry. "I'm sure you could write one or two stories that we could sell as fiction."

Harry blinked. "There's a difference between fiction and reality, I reckon," he said.

"Oh?"

"Fiction has to make sense," He waved his hand around in the air before him. "Whereas this reality I live in rarely does."

Ginny paused to think about that. "You'd make a good writer, I think."

"It's an option if the world doesn't explode or something equally unfortunate happens," Harry pursed his lips in thought and tilted his head to the side.

"Can you hear that?" he asked.

Ginny listened. "What?"

"That buzzing," Harry said, standing up, cocking his head to the other side. "It reminds me of—"

BOOM!

The entire building suddenly shook in its foundations and Harry stumbled backwards into his chair, slamming into the wall as a series of cracks clawed their way through the plaster. Portraits fell to the floor and the door broke away on its hinges.

Ginny tumbled off her stool and Harry helped her up as the tremors subsided. "What....?"

"There's power here," Harry growled. "But it isn't Voldemort – if it was we'd probably be dust now." He paused and then frowned. "It feels strange... false."

Ginny shook her head and a lot of dusty plaster fell out of her hair. "Well," she said, drawing her wand. "Let's go."

Harry looked at her for a long moment, from her wand and then up into her eyes. He saw the defiance in those brown-white pools, the defiance that raged in every human being. Sometimes Harry felt that humans were unique in the universe for that, and knew short of binding her here

she was coming with him.

"I'll lead," he said. "Stay behind me."

The entire building shook again as Harry and Ginny ran down the corridor with the view of Canberra on one side and the portraits on the other. It had been in this corridor that ten Aurors had tried to kill Harry and stop his takeover of the Ministry. Harry was ready for the blast this time though, and as the windows cracked and smashed he steadied himself and felt for the source of the magic.

It was coming from the foyer, the ground floor, he was sure of it. He grabbed Ginny, held her close, and then Apparated down straight into the chaos.

He was confident that he could easily handle whatever this was. Nevertheless they appeared out of sight standing behind a concrete white pillar in the foyer, which was now eerily silent.

Ginny flinched when she saw the smear of blood across the white pillar and Harry turned his head around the corner, catching a quick glimpse of the open foyer. Bodies were strewn haphazardly over its expanse in various states of dismemberment and destruction. Blood was splattered across the wall, floors and furniture.

Other terrified magical folk were either cowering or firing spells towards the five black robed Death Eaters that stood in the centre of the foyer, back to back and laughing as they cast destructive and killing spells from their wands.

Five Death Eaters, he thought, his vision narrowing as he stared at the masked figures. It was pitiful of Voldemort to think such an attack could stop him. It was surprising, however, how much damage these five had inflicted in so short a time. Many of the dead and dying about the smoking foyer were Aurors.

Powerful magic but normal magic, he thought. *They'll pay for this.* He

began to step out from behind the pillar.

Ginny grasped his arm. "Something's not right," she frowned.

Harry paused for a moment. "It'll be fine," he said. "I've handled a lot worse than this scum."

Reluctantly Ginny let him go and Harry stepped out from behind the pillar, his hands already flaring with power. As if that was the signal the Death Eaters suddenly spun and looked straight at him. Harry's scar rippled with pain as they did and he only just managed to throw himself out of the way of a Killing Curse that reverberated through the air faster than he thought possible.

He kept rolling when he was down, through a puddle of blood and over a pile of rubble. His scar was merciless, digging into his mind – it was as if Voldemort was there, but Harry knew he wasn't. His power encased hands had torn the floor apart and set the stone itself alight.

Curses were raining down upon him and with a thought he set up a barrier around Ginny to keep her safe and hidden behind the white pillar. As he rolled to avoid the multitude of colourful curses, rainbow death, he saw her battering against it uselessly.

The Death Eaters were laughing – *laughing!* – he could hear. And that, more than anything else, told him that something wasn't right. Just as Ginny had predicted. No more time for thought though, as suddenly Harry could not move his legs and his arms were pinned to his sides.

He'd been caught by a magic he hadn't expected. Harry had been overconfident and for the first time in many years the Darkslayer had been outclassed.

Heart-stopping, gut-wrenching, mind-breaking pain assaulted his head from the scar and Harry felt almost blinded by it. Never in many years had he been so quickly and utterly disabled. Hovering through the air

quickly, he soon knelt before the five masked figures.

“Vestic!” a white robed Auror bellowed, diving out from behind the wand validating desk and towards an overturned table. He was halfway through the air towards the ground when one of the Death Eaters spun with the speed of a master duellist and fired a thick green beam silently from his wand.

It spun through the air, cut right through the Auror’s purple curse, and powered the man already dead back into and through the wall.

Burning plaster and green flame, wrapped in smoke, exploded outwards and scattered across the ruined and dead strewn floor.

Harry growled and struggled against the invisible bonds that held him before the five Death Eaters. His palms exploded with power that burnt his clothes but not his flesh, and he raged against the magic that imprisoned him. It was like battling uphill though, and that shocked Harry so much that his control wavered over his power and it slipped away.

Looking into the masks of his enemies, Harry saw that their eyes were glowing faintly red – red with power. These were not average Death Eaters... something else. As he struggled to break the spells on his limbs, the net holding him stretched and fought back any of his attempts to snap the cords.

They were bendy, rubber even – he couldn’t snap them.

“Harry Potter,” the nearest Death Eater drawled, and the voice was familiar to Harry, clawing into the reaches of his mind. “Kneeling in the blood of those he swore to protect....”

Harry’s mind worked fast. “Lucius Malfoy,” he grinned. Little trick about intimidation that had served him well over the years – keep smiling, keep your eyes wide... it was very unnerving. “Your eyes are glowing.”

Malfoy tore off his mask, throwing it to the floor before Harry. His blonde hair fell down around his shoulders and, as his eyes flared red, Harry’s scar suffered a jolt of particularly sharp pain. His voice also changed

when he spoke next. It was Malfoy's drawl, but it also sounded like a snake – like Voldemort.

"A gift from the Dark Lord, Potter," Lucius said, baring his teeth. His wand, and the wands of the other Death Eaters, was levelled between Harry's eyes. Everyone else in the foyer had been subdued, had been killed. "Power to destroy you."

Harry blinked. "No such power exists," he smiled.

"You'll die just like anyone else," a female, croaky and gleeful voice said to Lucius' left. Her mask came away as well, and the other three Death Eaters soon followed suit.

"Bellatrix Lestrange," Harry nodded, his arms straining against the invisible bonds. "Draco, and two newcomers. Well now it's a party."

"Enough games, Lucius, kill him," one of the Death Eaters Harry didn't know said. Her eyes were glowing as well.

"All in good time, Alecko," Lucius Malfoy whispered. "First, I wish to make him suffer – suffer like the Dark Lord made me suffer after every time he thwarted us, for all the plans he ruined."

Harry laughed, harsh and bitter. "You are a very little man, Lucius," he said. "Do your worst, but know this – it better kill me...."

"Defiant to the last, Potter," Draco Malfoy spat, his hand tightening on his wand. "Can't you see that you've lost?"

"So much you never knew, Draco," Harry sighed. "So much that could have been changed. You were too weak to see that, all of you Death Eaters are. No matter, you and the master you serve will all burn in the same pit by the time I'm done."

"*Crucio!*" Malfoy senior and junior hissed at the same time. Bellatrix laughed and added her own pain curse, whilst the other two Death

Eaters kept their wands raised for an attack.

Ah, the Cruciatus Curse, Harry knew it well. It had been many decades since he had last felt it but it still felt like an old friend.

Harry crouched down on his knees and didn't scream. He embraced the pain. And what pain it was – his every nerve was on fire, melting and exploding. Consciousness remained of course, that was the beauty of cruciatus.

Come away, Ethan said softly, as the pain rose to a crescendo in sync with his scar. All the years he had grown accustomed to such feelings, and now his tortured mind wanted no more.

Harry floated, time slowed, and he found himself standing next to Ethan, cloak billowing on invisible air, as he watched his mortal body tortured and broken from above.

The Malfoy's and Bellatrix had sadistic, vindictive, even eager looks upon their faces as magic, charged somehow to match his own (match Voldemort's), streamed from their wands and into his body.

"This is a new development," Harry sighed. His voice sounded distant in his ears, like an echo.

Ethan was there, hands in his pockets. He just smiled and turned away. "They'll keep that up until your mind snaps," he said.

Harry chuckled, his eyes wild. "They're trying to break something that's already broken."

Ethan nodded – it was the truth. "What do you think it means to be human, Harry?" he asked, looking at the glee in Bellatrix Lestrange's haunted eyes. "Is that human? Are you human, able to take that pain, fight it all, defy Death itself? Am I human... living as I do, not alive and not

dead but some bitter joke in between?”

Are we players in this game not human? Harry wondered, floating next to his pain ridden body. *The main players – Voldemort, Ethan, myself. Have we become something else, something less?*

The eager and happy glint in the Death Eater’s eyes – was that human... could he see Satan laughing with delight in the reflective glint of those dark eyes. Did he want to? Would that give it some meaning... define an answer?

“We’re all in the same seething boat of humanity,” Harry shrugged. “Some of us make the best of it – you and I keep the boat afloat. That look in Bellatrix’s eyes is human, the pain is human... what you are, the soul... is all that is human.”

“The Soul in the Hero,” Ethan chuckled. “The Soul of the Hero... if I’m here where is your soul?”

Harry snorted. “Circling the drain for all I know. Sold it a long time ago – tore it to shreds with all the life I’ve taken.”

Ethan strode around Harry’s anguished body, mouth set in a silent scream of pain. “That’s rather bleak,” he said. “Are you sure?”

Harry looked over to where Ginny was, behind the blood stained white pillar about forty feet away. “I’m damned, Ethan,” he said.

“Well there’s no use frowning about it.”

Harry laughed, lacing it with insanity. “What am I supposed to do? Eat, sleep, and be merry?”

Ethan nodded thoughtfully. “A lot of people would be happy with such a simple existence.”

“I think you’ve forgotten that I’m being tortured to death....”

“Of course you could meet a pretty girl, one that makes you laugh,” Ethan continued. “Find your soul there, maybe....”

“If my soul is anywhere it’s laying butchered in one of those worlds I destroyed.”

Ethan chuckled. “So dramatic – when is enough enough, Harry? When do you lie down and die? When does the white flag go up? Anyone would

understand perfectly if you were to quit, none of them would have lasted half as long as you did, and yet you soldier on doing the dirty work. I’ve seen it all with you, and yet I have no idea how your mind works.”

“You think I do?” Harry croaked, both his out-of-body face and his real face extremely pale. “All I know,” he continued, a bit angrily, “is that I go on – is that I survive! Why am I always the survivor? I don’t know... I guess somebody has to be. S-some... someone has to remember the madness.”

Ethan tapped his fingers together slowly, thoughtfully. His fringe fell down into his eyes and he threw his head back to dislodge it. Not much time had passed back in his body, Harry knew, but he was getting impatient.

“That is,” Ethan eventually said, “bullshit. You’ll die, Harry, you’ll die regretting the small things.”

Harry scowled. “I do love our little chats – I think we’ve made some real progress in today’s session. Meanwhile, back in reality, I’m being *cruciod* to death!”

“Then do something about it,” Ethan shrugged. “You’re the hero... I’m just caught up in the trail you’re blazing across everything.”

Harry sighed – it contained the pain of and age and also the fatal fatigue

of everything he had ever done. "I'm tired of feeling like this...."

"Then stop," Ethan replied, himself able to feel the pain and anguish Harry suffered. "Smile once in awhile, tell a joke.... we're all doomed anyway, might as well go out looking as if you enjoyed it."

Harry paused for a long moment in reflection of that, eventually shaking his head in indecision and motioning to his body, which was still being tortured quite effectively. "Any suggestions about this?" he asked Ethan. "They're binding me with something that stretches. Something I can't snap with raw power because it just grows and bends."

"That's a new one," Ethan said, stroking his chin in thought. "Their power isn't natural, you know, I think Voldemort is using them as puppets from afar."

"I do too."

Ethan nodded slowly and then walked back around to Harry, putting a hand on his shoulder. "It is going to hurt a hell of a lot when you get back in there...."

"I know, I know... no ideas on this one?" he asked, feeling the pull of his body once again. This place, detached in his mind, wasn't a safe haven for long.

Ethan shrugged and did look a tad sympathetic. "Suck it in, bite down on it... let Ginny free, she might be able to distract them."

Harry took a step back towards consciousness, feeling the first bites of pain in his mind and scar. "That all?"

"Don't let them see your fear."

Harry nodded. "Until next time, Ethan."

Harry screamed – he couldn't stop it – as pain beyond imagining

suddenly bloomed in every part of his body. White hot knives cut him open, sub zero blades ran him through... every nerve erupted with crippling pain. And that was just the Cruciatus. His scar burned with the fire of the sun. His head flailed from left to right and his eyes rolled up into his skull.

Whether he wanted to release it or not didn't matter now, because the shield around Ginny fell away as his mind was tortured and broken. He couldn't hold it, not and stay alive. Ginny was no longer held out of this fight.

He heard laughter, saw the crimson beams of pain through blurry eyes, and forced every fibre of his being into defying it. If there was one thing Harry could do, it was defy. He slowly began to laugh, embracing the pain. It had brought out his less than sane side, opened the fractures that had taken one hundred years to seal....

No matter, Harry's new outlook on life required maniacal laughter.

His magic was a surging ocean, a torrent of swelling water that was angry, furious, battering for use inside of him. He could still feel the invisible stretching bonds that kept his murderous palms tightly bound, and he knew thought magic was too weak to use against this bunch of puppets, but he threw all he had against the bonds anyway.

It wasn't the Death Eaters strength he was raging against, it was Voldemorts. And that strength was equal to his in every possible way. Two sides of a coin, opposite equals....

Harry thought he was going to die, and his laughter increased for a moment when he wondered what he would have to fight in Death. He even imagined that out of the corner of his eye he could see that hooded scythe-wielding Reaper standing silently, watching as he finally abandoned life.

The farce is done; I got to seek a vast perhaps.

“HARRY!”

His surging power sloshed uselessly against Voldemort’s stretching bonds, but Harry didn’t cease the attack. He’d die fighting – as he always knew he would.

But then that sounded too much like defeat....

It is defeat, Ethan growled. Fight, damn you. We will not die on our knees!

The pain had to have reached its peak now, and yet it remained stronger than ever. He blinked, he thought, but didn’t really feel it. In that moment his blurry eyes cleared and he saw Ginny, rushing towards him with her wand in one hand and something he couldn’t identify in the other.

The pain was relentless and he soon lost this image of the woman he loved.

Ginny ran, jumping over rubble and bodies and raised her wand to bring it down in a slashing arc, casting the Vestic killing curse with every bit of strength she could muster. The Death Eaters saw her however, felt her magic, and her thick purple beam was deflected by the one called Alecto. It shot up into the ceiling and brought down a rain of plaster chunks and dust.

Ginny wasn’t deterred – single minded in her desire to save Harry – she propelled herself forward as a dark blue curse, something she didn’t recognise, burnt through the air just where her head had been a second earlier.

“*Reducto!*” she cried, taking a shot at one of the Death Eaters cursing Harry. It was Bellatrix Lestrange.

It didn’t get close, as one of the two Death Eaters not cursing Harry levitated a large slab of broken marble into its path. Her curse was powerful enough to reduce that to dust, and using the plume that

exploded from it Ginny struggled to her knees—
—and received a burning curse in her shoulder faster than she thought one could travel. These Death Eaters were not the usual brainless morons she was used to. Spinning backwards over rubble and corpses, Ginny's grip tightened on the white rose she held in her other hand. Her wand she had dropped as her shoulder burnt and the tumble across the floor bruised her body and cut her face.

The thorns on the rose cut deep into her hand and that blood flowed onto the silk white petals. Streaks of crimson bled across the flower and it began to glow – to shine with a faint golden light.

Sobbing slightly – her head was bleeding – Ginny leaned over on her side and, as if gripped by some force that wasn't her own, she gazed at Harry as he screamed again, and threw the white rose through the air towards him. She shuddered then, collapsing from the pain and ceasing to breathe.

The rose spiralled through the air, an arc of crimson drops wheeling out behind it as it reached its peak and began to fall down towards Harry. It sung as it fell, like phoenix song only higher, and came to a stop hovering before the Darkslayer, whose eyes focused on it with renewed hope.

Harry's laughter rang out around the desolate foyer.

The rose cut between Harry and one of the red beams of the cruciatus, the one connecting him to Lucius Malfoy. A heartbeat, an eternity, ticked by and then the link between them was broken.

The rose exploded, severing the curse and propelling all of the Death Eaters back. A protective shell rose around Harry as the bonds binding his arms and legs were broken, and protected him from the blast that burnt and shocked the Death Eaters.

The pain gone, Harry collapsed backwards with a cry of relief, drifting in and out of consciousness. His power was still surging however, still

roaring to be used, and a stream of it broke free of his body against his will and sent a wave of searing hot fire in the general direction of the Death Eaters.

Amicus Carrow was burnt to less than ash a moment later, but no one saw it. Weakened from the pain, blinded by the sorrow, Harry hit the floor hard and took a few shaky breaths, looking around for Ginny – for that had been her rose.

He saw another sight first – Ron and Hermione... Maggie Thorn and several dozen Aurors were running from the elevator, from the stairs, Apparating down into the fight. He didn't give a damn about that though, as he saw Ginny lying all too still about fifteen feet away.

His heart stopped, his mind froze, and he went berserk. Roaring defiance in his last breath, screaming against inevitability! He was growling, drooling, foaming around the mouth as he crawled over limbs and rubble, corpses and through blood to reach her.

The Aurors ran passed him on either side, Ron and Hermione were lost to his sight in the sudden sea of people, but that didn't matter.

He had travelled so far, for so long, across millions of miles and thousands of worlds – that journey had taken one hundred years of his first life... this journey, a mere fifteen feet, felt like a thousand years. Ginny's hair had streaks of blood in it. She had hit a slab of concrete and was bleeding. Her shoulder was also smoking, a slow fire eating away at her clothes.

He didn't cry as he drew closer, but he wanted to. It just wasn't in him, nothing there. He was powerless to cry. Emotion... was foreign to him now.

Ron couldn't see Harry or Ginny, wasn't even sure they were here, but he did see a wall of fire blast away a Death Eater who was trying to get to his feet. That had to have been Harry. He then saw the Malfoy's – Lucius

and Draco, and he became blinded by rage.

Rushing forward, leaving Hermione behind, Ron was one of the first to send a curse at the Death Eaters who seemed weakened and crippled. Bellatrix Lestrange was there as well, and another woman he didn't recognise. He aimed all his curses at the youngest Malfoy though, the bastard who had portkeyed them to Voldemort in March and helped condemn Harry to a journey across time itself.

"MALFOY!" he shouted. "*VESTIC!*"

His curse missed by just an inch, but soon dozens of others streamed over his head and to either side as the Aurors joined him in battle. The Death Eaters seemed stunned, confused, and Ron was certain they had them. His eyes met the younger Malfoys and a look of pure hate was shared between the both of them.

Draco raised his wand to strike, but his father grasped his arm and a moment later they disappeared. Outnumbered severely now, Bellatrix and the other Death Eater followed Lucius' example. They feared their Lord's punishment, but to stay meant certain death.

Hermione came running up next to Ron, breathing heavily and scanning the dead and destroyed throughout the foyer. "Where's Harry...?" she breathed.

After what could have been forever Harry was looking down upon Ginny through tear stained eyes. Tears that wouldn't leave his eyes. She was pale, as pale as death, and he feared to reach for her, to look for her pulse.

But he did... and it was there, weak but beating. Her eyes moved beneath her closed eyelids as well and Harry gently pressed his hand against the bleeding gash on the side of her head. He was tired now, his every nerve still strained and burning from the aftermath of so much pain, but he found the strength to do what he did next.

His palm shone white against the side of her head and he closed the wound, the magic use draining him exponentially. His vision faded, black spots swimming before his eyes, and yet he wasn't done. Her shoulder was a mess of burnt tissue and agonising pain, he saw.

Her flesh was hard under his hand as he placed it over that wound and muttered words of healing he thought he had forgotten. They were there when he needed them now, and when he removed his hand her shoulder was whole again with unblemished skin.

Harry smiled as Ginny began to breathe more easily, and looking down upon her like that he passed out onto the same slab of stone she had – his fingers rested lightly on hers, covered in blood and dirt. His mind faded, he didn't know if there were enemies nearby or if he'd even awake. That was something he would now have to trust to his old adversary, Fate.

Well... Ethan said, that was a close one.

Harry hurt. He hurt. *We done good, kid, he managed. One point for love... chalk that up on the tally.*

We are way beyond a tally now, Harry, was the reply. I think you have to wake up.

When Harry opened his eyes, everything was blurred for a moment but then it grew clear. Ginny was now looking down upon him. Her hair was matted with blood on one side and her face carried streaks of it as well. There was a hole in her blouse, singed black around the edges, and tear stains on her cheeks. She was conscious however, alive!

"Harry," she said softly as he opened his eyes.

Some time had gone by since he passed out, but not much. He was still in the Ministry foyer, still lying on the ground, but he had managed to heal

Ginny.

Harry's mind felt slow, slurred, and he raised his arm shakily to brush a few strands of Ginny's hair back behind her ear. She was close, their noses almost touching, and a drunken smile spread across his face.

"You have," he managed, his voice weak and croaky, "a very nice facial structure, Gin. Very nice indeed."

Ginny half laughed half sobbed, taking his hand between her own and kissing it once. "You're okay now, Harry. It's over...."

It will never be over!

Harry flinched and pushed back that voice of the past. "Very proportional," he continued, still admiring her face. His memory slipped into pain. "I knew a girl who looked like you once...."

Harry's eyes rolled back into his head again and he groaned. It hurt to groan. He was laughing, he thought, but it was actually coughing. His mind hurt, thoughts hurt, nightmares stabbed at him:

God pisses on your world, Harry. Here, have a rose. Allarius the demon.

"Roses were red... violets are blue... enjoy it while it lasts, Harry... because there's not much left for you."

He blinked and was back in the Ministry, breathing steadily. Ron and Hermione were there this time, with Ginny, looking down upon him. He could see a pockmarked and ash stained ceiling as well.

"What do you say to Paris, Gin?" he said, still not quite there in his mind. "We could forget all this and go have cake in Paris."

Ginny stroked his forehead, her hand cool against his hot scar. He had almost forgotten that it was still burning. It seemed to lessen when Ginny touched it. "I think Paris will have to wait, Harry," she sighed. "How do

you feel?”

He sighed and stretched his limbs, twisting a little on the ground. “Did I get hit by a train or something?” he managed, wincing at the bolts of pain that let him know he was still alive.”

Ron chuckled. “That probably would have hurt less....”

“Ron,” Hermione *tsked*, slapping him on the arm. “That’s not fun—”

Harry laughed and he felt a bit more like himself. “We have to get out of here,” he said. “If Maggie Thorn sees me like this she’ll probably have me hanged while she can.”

Ginny flinched and then looked up behind Harry, biting her bottom lip. Harry turned his head and then cursed.

“Minister,” Maggie Thorn said. Behind her were half a dozen Aurors, grim and holding wands. In a hundred years Harry had never felt so powerless.

“Shall I fetch a noose?”

With Ron and Ginny’s help, Harry managed to sit up, his arms resting on his knees and his head dangling down towards the floor for a minute. For a moment despair gripped him – his enemies just kept gaining numbers and getting more powerful, whilst he was left to throw together as many allies of the Light that he could. Allies that for the most part were ignorant and unwilling. But he worked past that despair... there would be a way.

“What is the damage, Mrs Thorn?” he asked his deputy minister.

Maggie Thorn looked at him for a long moment, and for once it wasn’t with a scowl. Perhaps for the first time she was seeing him as a leader. “At least thirty dead, I can see, with some damage to the Ministry’s structure and key supports. Recommend repairs are done immediately, Minister.”

"See to it please," Harry managed, wincing every time he moved anything or blinked or breathed. Already though he could feel his strength returning, slowly but surely. He was going to be sore for a few days, but he would be able to function. "I'll be gone for a few days after I leave, Thorn," he then said. "Circumstances have changed. When the Twilight Guardians come next, tell them I'll see the army before the 31st."

"Where are you going?"

"I've too many enemies," Harry said, leaning on Ron as he stood. "Ah...." His legs only just supported him. "....And too few allies. I'm going to try and change that."

Do you see a happy ending to your life, your legend? Ethan asked as, supported by his friends, Harry began to limp towards the elevators.

There is no such thing, Harry replied in a tone that had been cultivated by experience. *I'm looking at the end of a long life, Ethan, and all I can see is fire.*

Chapter 17 – Reality of a Broken Mind

If you understand hallucination and illusion, you don't blindly follow any leader. You must know if the person is sane or insane, over the abyss.

~~Young

Saturday,
1997

July

26th

Harry had felt better.

He'd felt a lot better.

In fact, he couldn't remember feeling much worse than he did now. He was sure that at some point in his long life he had felt worse, but if he had then he was thankful he couldn't remember it.

Because he felt absolutely terrible now.

Lying on his bed he tried very hard not to move and only breathe when he had to. All his joints were excruciatingly painful, more so from the cruciatus than all the other wounds he had collected over time. His skin was inflamed, his scar merciless, and his body felt... dry.

"Drink this," Ginny said, hovering over him. She had a potion vial in her hand and was lifting his head as gently as she could to pour it down his throat. "Supposed to help with the after effects of the curse."

She brushed his hair back on his forehead as he swallowed the foul tasting concoction. It did help, a bit, and Harry fell back down with a sigh of mild relief. "How's the head doing?" he asked her.

"It feels fine," she smiled. "My shoulder itches a bit – it's irritating."

Harry nodded. "I don't remember much of healing you," he said. "I was worried that I'd done a poor job."

Ginny shrugged. "I'm still here and I'm still in one piece. Though this last fight was a close one... for all of us." Her deep brown eyes locked onto his emerald ones and more was said that couldn't be heard.

"I underestimated Voldemort," Harry said. "I was overconfident in my power. Though, I have some right to that – I haven't been overcome by an enemy in decades, Gin."

"I just don't want you to die," she said, resting her hand on his chest.

Harry winked. "I intend to live forever," he said, "or die trying."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Ginny replied, smiling sadly. "We'll never get cake in Paris if you do."

"Eh?"

"You said that," she said, smiling again now but with bemusement. "In the Ministry after you woke up."

"I did?"

Ginny nodded. "You did – and you also complimented me on my very nice facial structure."

Harry snorted, laughed, and then winced as his every fibre protested to the effort and the movement. "You got any more of that potion?"

"The instructions say only one every few hours, Mr. Potter," she said, shaking her head. "You can have one in two hours at three."

Harry sighed. "I don't think its going to be painkillers that finally does me in, Gin. Come on...."

Shaking her head in defeat, and knowing that he was really in pain, Ginny reached into her pocket and pulled out another vial of the potion. "You can have half of one, Harry Potter," she said, and poured it down his throat. "And no more for at least *four* hours."

The potion worked its way quickly into his joints and the tension slackened a bit. Harry exhaled with relief. "I'll be on my feet in ten minutes," he said, stretching his neck. "I can't waste four hours."

He struggled to sit up but Ginny effortlessly kept her hands on his chest. He couldn't move he was so weakened. "You are not going anywhere. Three super-powerful cruciatus curses all at the same time is enough to

take the strength out of anyone.”

Harry grabbed her wrist and tried to move her hand. “Yeah,” he said, “but I’m a lot stronger than most.”

“Not a chance, Potter,” she growled, and slapped his hand away.

“Oh ow,” Harry complained, and then laughed as Ginny did. “I feel a lot better now,” he ended with a sigh.

“Better!?” Ginny exclaimed. “You can’t even move my hand – you’re as weak as a kitten.”

Harry nodded. “I meant up here,” he said, and tapped his forehead. “I think the cruciatus, and the talk I had with Ethan, loosened up a few of those bolts that I’d tightened over the years.”

“I thought those bolts were what kept you sane?”

“What’s ‘sane’ these days?” Harry whispered, and rested his hand on top of Ginny’s. Little sparks of pain blossomed in his fingertips but it was bearable. “I feel a lot... lighter, if that’s the word – and I don’t just think I’m high on painkilling potion.” Ginny grinned. “It’s more like I’ve... more like....”

“Spit it out, kid.”

Harry found the right words. “More like if we’re all going to die, we might as well die smiling, if you understand that. I’m not sure I do... but that’s not important.”

Ginny looked at him for a long moment, sitting on the edge of his bed as she was, his hand upon hers on his chest. “Do you feel dizzy?” she eventually asked. “Light headed?”

“A little bit,” Harry confessed.

“Too much potion, I’m afraid. But you seem a lot less intimidating like this, Harry. Is this a new outlook on life?”

Harry ran his tongue between his teeth. His scar was still burning, on the edge of extremely painful, but Voldemort’s anger seemed to be flowing away now. About time as well, it had been burning non-stop for hours. “A new outlook?” he said in response to Ginny. “You know, it might be. What would you rather have – miserable bastard Harry or carefree funny Harry?”

“You have to ask?” Ginny smiled, and swung her legs onto the bed so she was lying down next to him, one hand between their bodies and one still on his chest. “I’ll settle for calm and sensible Harry, if you’ve got him.”

“Haven’t had him for years,” Harry chuckled and his throat burned. “Ow... can I have some more potion?”

Ginny sighed, but she did give him the rest of the bottle. It was the last bottle as well. “You’ll have to ask Hermione to brew some more if you don’t start getting better,” she told him.

Harry felt a lot better than he had done a few minutes ago, but also light headed from the double dose of painkillers he’d ingested. With Ginny at his side, he stared up and out of the open window into the clear blue sky over the south coast of Australia. It had taken all of his strength – every last scrap of it – to Apparate his friends and himself back here after the Ministry attack. He had passed out as soon as he had arrived.

He thought about this latest development of Voldemort’s. Fusing power, raw power, into his human servants. It was immoral, wrong, vicious and cruel, but then he expected nothing less from the Dark Lord. It was a problem, for sure, one he couldn’t fix without annihilating Voldemort. And that was a challenge unto itself – one he wasn’t confident he could win.

There was no way Harry could safely fuse power into his own allies, say into his friends, and even if he could he wouldn’t. It was not natural. It

was against the order of things in the universe, in time and existence. He'd broken enough of those rules, made enough enemies, that way.

You'll just have to take it one enemy at a time, Ethan suggested. He was as tired as Harry.

I can't win this alone, Harry replied.

You may not have a choice, Ethan shrugged. *But do what you will anyway, Darkslayer. I just hope that someone is there to put out the fires when you're done.*

As always there was another problem biting at Harry from the back of his mind. The Destroyers. Such a simple name for a race of creatures, shadow itself, evil incarnate. They were coming to Earth, to this earth – to his home world. Not in the form of the demon Allarius, as he had destroyed that once before, but as billions upon billions of soldiers. Most likely in forms of inconceivable terror – the stuff of nightmares.

Harry was pretty sure he would feel it when they burst through the Boundary and into the world. He was pretty sure the entire world would know and feel it. How could he stop them? Should he even try? It would be next to impossible to find them in the Boundary – it was infinite, but once they burst through then it would be too late to save this world.

Juggling and juggling, Harry thought. He was juggling too many problems, and had already dropped a few of the proverbial balls. The Destroyers, under Voldemort, would destroy twilight if he could, murder the white rose, and Harry instinctively knew there would be no point in fighting if they did.

He had begun to suspect, given his life, that he was just as vital in some way to the workings of the universe – at least for this current period of Creation. If he were to die, alongside the rose or twilight, then it would be the end. He wondered if there was a story out there where he ever got to live in a world free of war.

For no reason that he knew, he doubted that.

“You look like you just swallowed a lemon, Harry,” Ginny commented.

Harry blinked. “I was thinking about... about life in general.”

The Destroyers floated to the front of his mind again and Harry became frustrated at the lack of progress he had made in the weeks since he had learnt of the threat. It was the single greatest danger the planet faced, next to Voldemort. He wondered if he were powerful enough to throw up a shield across the entire planet – one that would prevent travel between worlds.

A defence net. It had possibilities.

Easier said than done, he knew, but so far it was his only idea. The gamble would be if it would hold against a determined attack of the Destroyer forces and Voldemort’s dark strength. He was just one man, after all, only human. And he had seen many worlds fall to a last defence... those worlds had rarely survived.

Although he had said he needed to be up and fighting within ten minutes, Harry found himself drifting to sleep. All across the worlds forces of light and dark were gearing up for war, whether they knew it or not, and Harry slept right through that day and the following night.

It was eight o’clock the following morning when he finally woke up, and stretched slowly. His joints and bones cracked as he moved, but in a relieving way. The after effects of the cruciatus had burnt themselves out.

The pale light of dawn filtered in through his window and Harry yawned. He guessed that too much of that potion had made him drowsy and, coupled with the tiredness he constantly felt, he had finally succumbed to sleep for more than a few hours. In fact, he wasn’t sure if he had slept more than a single day – it could have been two, or three even.

It felt like just one however, and not a full one.

Knowing that he'd lost valuable time - time in which to plan, to plot, to fight and to kill – Harry slowly got up out of the bed. He was alone in his room; Ginny wasn't where he had last seen her at his side. He still felt a few aches over his body and knew he smelt none to fresh. So grabbing some clothes from his closet and a towel, Harry jumped into the shower. The hot water did wonders for his aches and pains.

Upon exiting the shower, Harry wiped away the condensation on the mirror and beheld his gaunt exterior, his reflection. That pale and haggard looking figure that looked back at him through the mirror was a stranger.

"You've looked better, Potter," he told himself, running both his hands back through his damp hair. It was longer than he usually had it, and, of course, hanging down and sticking up at odd angles. His fringe was brushing his eyelashes.

His cheeks were pale and his eyes were ringed with bruises, thanks to the cruciatus. His left eye was bloodshot as well, making him look a little wild.

Instead of trimming his long hair back, Harry conjured a black bandana out of a small washcloth on the sink and wrapped that across his forehead and back under his hair. It pushed his fringe up and shoved the bulk of his hair behind his ears.

His scar twitched against the fabric but it was barely noticeable. Pulling on his black jeans and shrugging on his button up shirt, Harry forewent shaving and Apparated over to the kitchen. Hunger had finally won out, and when he appeared he made Hermione jump and Ron reach for his wand.

"Blimey, Harry," Ron breathed. "Sorry, don't know what to expect these days."

"You should still be in bed," Ginny said, from behind him. She stood in

the kitchen in her pyjamas, milk in one hand and a box of cornflakes in the other. "But since you're not we probably won't get you back in there."

"What day is it?" Harry asked. His voice cracked when he spoke, but again it was a relief as the pain in his throat lessened a bit.

"Sunday," Hermione said, eating her own bowl of cereal with a large book propped up in front of her. "You've been asleep nearly twenty four hours."

Harry nodded and sat down at the table. There was a plate of toast in the centre and he grabbed a few slices of that, eating it as it was – only buttered. "Anything interesting happen in that time?" he asked. "Anything dire to report?"

"All the papers were full of the usual doom and gloom," Hermione answered him, motioning to a stack of folded newspaper on the kitchen side. "The Muggles are scared, Harry. Too much magic has been revealed to them in the last few weeks. The least of all that monster you fought above London." She shuddered at the end there.

"Or that massacre in Perth," Harry mused. "How about the wizarding papers?"

"Some are calling you a hero for taking a zero tolerance stance with Death Eaters you capture and... and other things." Hermione didn't want to talk about the men and women Harry had had executed, so she didn't. "Most are out for your blood, but that's just propaganda for the Ministries you threatened at the International Confederation."

"And the *Prophet*?"

Ron grinned. "Dad must have spoken to them, because it said this morning that our Ministry has thrown its full support behind you. I bet that pisses off a few of those other governments."

Harry swallowed the dry toast and nodded. "I just hope it doesn't lead to

war,” he said, and Ron’s grin faded. “We’ve enough to be fighting against without fighting against each other. Which reminds me, I’ve got to go see a few old friends.”

Ginny was just sitting down as he stood up and she raised her eyebrows. “Where are you going, fella?” she said.

“Somewhere I think I have too,” Harry replied, frowning. “Somewhere I haven’t been in a very long time. I shouldn’t be too long, a few hours, and then I want you to be ready because we’re going back to London.”

They all nodded. “You still didn’t tell us where you’re going,” Ginny added. *Why are you always running....?*

“No I didn’t,” Harry agreed. “I’m going to the Forbidden Forest and I won’t be gone long.”

Winking once, Harry grinned and then Apparated about thirteen thousand miles across the face of the planet, through the Hogwart’s castle wards and appeared under a moonlit night sky. In the distance, the one place Harry had honestly called home was before him once again. Hogwarts.

It had been over one hundred years of war and heartache since he had last beheld the turreted school. It was currently school holidays, but there were still many torches burning up at the castle and it seemed to encase the entire structure in a faint glow of orange light.

Oddly enough, Harry only felt as if another piece of the jumble his life had become had fallen into place as he gazed upon the wizarding school. It still stood, as proud as ever. Harry turned away from it and headed into the forest.

It was a dark night and Harry soon lost sight of the moon and the scattering of silver stars that blanketed the sky under the canopy of trees. Twisted and broken roots blocked his path but he patiently worked his way deeper into the forest. It was cold but he didn’t feel it.

He *did* feel the multitude of dark creatures that the forest was home to. He felt them in his stomach, his sense of the insane, and wisely they kept away, clearing a path ahead of him as he walked. The darkness in the forest was oppressive, but Harry was an old friend of darkness. His eyes grew accustomed to what little light there was fairly quickly, and he headed yet deeper into the old wood.

Mist roiled about his ankles, swirling up around his knees as he disturbed it. The tree trunks in this part of the forest were impressively thick, but all was eerily silent. The forest held no fear for him, nor he for it – they were both old and powerful living creatures.

Eventually, in what could have been an hour later, Harry stepped out of the trees into a small glade, deep within the forest's heart. There was a large reflective pool which was so still and tranquil that the night sky reflected in it could have been real. The stars shone brightly in Harry's eyes as he walked to the water's edge, reached down into it and disturbed the surface by dropping a small stone. It created a ripple that disappeared into the night.

"A small stone may make a ripple at first, but someday it will be a wave."

Harry turned, having known he would meet the owner of that voice here. He wasn't wrong. "Good evening, Firenze, Bane... and you all."

The centaur herd that lived in the forest called this clearing their home, and as one they bowed to Harry as he turned and stood before them. Firenze moved forward, his blue eyes dazzling in the starlight. Harry vaguely recalled that he had been banished from the forest some time ago – for whatever reason he had been allowed back, must have something to do with the future they saw.

"Harry Potter," Firenze continued, "you once made a ripple, and now I fear you have created a wave that will wash us all away."

Straight to the point, Ethan mumbled.

"I felt a need to come here tonight," Harry replied as the centaur herd circled him, keeping his back to the lake. "You are creatures of magic, you do not simply use it – you are it. Tell me what you've read in the sky."

Some of the horsemen stamped their hoofs, and Harry got the distinct impression that they were afraid. It was Firenze, the centaur Harry was most familiar with, who answered him.

"We know the Darkslayer walks this world," he said, his eyes two chips of clearest sapphire fastened onto Harry's. "You are he, Harry Potter, and the heavens may fall because of it."

Harry shrugged. His own eyes were intimidating in the starlight. "Let them fall, I'm ready," he whispered.

"Whenever mortals undertake to shift the course of history, things can go horribly wrong, Darkslayer," Bane growled, his hands holding his crossbow tight. "Is your soul tired, Harry Potter?"

"There are many people like me who have killed their souls, Bane – don't forget that," Harry replied. The herd of centaurs was stoically silent, most dark silhouettes on this night.

"You came here wishing to know the future," Firenze said. It wasn't a question. "The future is war, Harry Potter, the future is *always* war. And you humans always seem to be at the forefront... with power you don't understand."

"Power only breeds war," Bane added.

"I want to understand," Harry said honestly, linking his hands. "And what of the centaurs, Firenze? You know as well as anyone the dark times that are ahead. Where do you stand?"

Firenze moved slowly in the night, carefully stepping around Harry whilst never losing eye contact with him. "If war is to come," he finally said, "let

it come. If the world is to be destroyed, so be it. If it is our fate to die, then we must simply die.”

Harry frowned... he did not agree with that. “No matter what happens,” he said, “...isn’t it important to try?”

Firenze walked back to the front of the herd, alongside Bane. “Do you know who you really are, Harry Potter?” he asked. “Your soul is dead, you say, and that is a terrible thing. Should you win this coming battle... your victory may be no different from the Dark Lord’s.”

The other centaurs stomped their hoofs in agreement. “You have fought many wars and seen much death, Harry Potter, and to many you are as much a destroyer as a saviour.”

Harry had to shrug at that. “I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, a lot of the time,” he said. “So, naturally, I became a hero. I’ve had to do some pretty damn distasteful things for the greater good, but I tried. I... I couldn’t save everyone.”

“What is done is done. The past should remain so....” Firenze whispered, trailing away as he and the other centaurs gazed as one up into the night sky.

Harry followed their gaze and saw a long, sparkling, shooting star make its way across the sky. A small asteroid burning across the sky, burning away to nothing. “A hero perhaps,” Firenze continued, still gazing at the blanket of stars. “But a hero who does not know what is in his soul.” At the end his eyes met Harry’s again. He sounded angry.

“|—”

“Who are you to lead this world to war?” Firenze cut in, stomping forward and cutting his hand down through the air. “You stand against evil when you do not know yourself. Mayhap you are just the lesser of two evils, Darkslayer. Millions have fallen to your swords. Planets and entire civilisations have been scorched by your hand – *that* is written in the sky,

as dark as blood!"

The centaur's fist came down hard, and Harry didn't blink. In a blur he raised his own arm and deflected the blow away. He smiled, and so did Firenze.

"We must never give up hope," Harry said simply, as if over drinks. "Never that. You are right, however. I am both light and dark, and those scales are tipping. In which direction I do not know."

Bane stepped forward, as did several other centaurs. "Would you like to?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"A chance to search your soul, to seek out your inner morality," Firenze continued for Bane. "A journey, of sorts, into your subconscious. You will know who you are without any deception, without any falsities veiling your vision. You will see, Harry Potter, and that can be a terrible thing."

"My life is a terrible thing," Harry sighed, with a small shrug. "Anything you chaps have got can't be worse."

For the first time that night, Firenze grinned, and Bane was handed a cloth sack from one of the centaurs shrouded in darkness. He reached into the sack and picked up a handful of shining... sparks. He was holding a handful of sparkling 'powder'.

Harry watched as the centaur opened his palm and the grains of shining white powder spun around his hand, swirling across his skin. "We remember,"

Bane whispered, and there was power in his words. "We See, we live, we die." He blew on the sparks of magic, of power, and in a flurry they shot across the air and struck Harry in the face.

Harry fell back, a small smile playing around his lips, and he laughed once before frowning. His legs gave way beneath him and he fell to his

knees in the dirt of the forest. He fell back as well, and one of the centaurs caught him before he tumbled into the lake. The creature lowered him slowly to the ground.

Firenze and Bane stood side by side as Harry twitched on the ground, his skin shining faintly white with the magic they had wrought upon him.

"Do you think he will survive, Firenze?" Bane asked. "Humans tend not to."

Firenze blinked. "He will not die. There is still too much he has to do."

"Knock! Knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door!"

Harry opened his eyes and wished he hadn't. He had seen a lot of things, wrong and terrible in his time, but what his eyes met now probably scarred him for life. Severus Snape was strumming a guitar on a stage before him, wearing nothing but a tight fitting pair of dark jeans and strumming an electric guitar.

Amazed and unable to turn away, Harry noted that the ill-tempered potions master had a tattoo of a revolver on one arm, and a rose on the other. This had to be the worst nightmare he had ever had.

"Mama put my guns in the ground. I can't shoot them any more. That cold black cloud is comin' down. Feels like I'm knockin' on heavens door."

Centaurs, he remembered, the centaurs had done something to him. Blown something into his face.

"HEAVENS DOOR!" Snape screeched, striking the strings of the guitar for all they were worth. Out of an amp came the sound, there were other instruments as well but no one playing them.

“What the bloody hell is going on!?” Harry eloquently summed up his thoughts.

He was standing in a large concert hall. Red seats stretched away into the darkness on his left and right, and behind him as well. He was alone when he turned back to the stage and Snape.

“I have never been this scared,” he decided.

Someone was clapping behind him as Snape jumped up into the air and brought his guitar smacking down into the stage. “WHOO! WHOO! AGAIN! ENCORE!”

Harry spun and saw... a strange little man sitting a few rows away. He had a large cup of soada with a twisty clear straw and was holding a box of what Harry assumed was popcorn.

“DOWN IN FRONT YOU!” the little dwarf man cried and threw his cup at Harry. Harry ducked and turned around just in time to see Snape disappear in a blur of white smoke. He turned back quickly to see the little man was now balancing on the edge of the seat closest to him. “lo, Harry,” he said.

About three feet tall, with long ears and a wispy grey beard, this little man was indeed just that – a little man. He was wearing a green golfer’s hat, was dressed in a pair of miniature jeans, a black shirt and a red tie.

“Time out, little guy,” Harry said, and took a few steps back. “What the hell is going on here?” Harry’s palms twitched with power.

The man raised his hands, looking down at Harry’s palms. “Whoa, lad, keep it down, aye. Ain’t nothing here that needs killing. My name is Beelzebub, the little devil, and you must be here for the standard soul searching inner peace quest thing.”

Harry blinked. *Beelzebub... someone had a sick sense of humour.* “I’m here because a centaur threw some white glowing powder in my face.”

“Ah,” Beelzebub grinned. “You fell for the old centaur trick then. And if anyone has a sick sense of humour, *Darkslayer*, it is you. Anything you see here is a product of your own imagination – even me.”

Harry paused for a moment there... the little devil had just read his mind. Also, if what he said were true, then.... “You mean I envisioned Snape half naked playing the guitar!?” he asked.

Beelzebub moved his eyebrows up and down and his eyes spun in his sockets. “That was me having a little bit of fun,” he said. “But I am you in a weird and perfectly unexplainable way, so yes, Harry, your inner consciousness created that greasy man with the guitar melting out into some hard face, ass kicking, Guns N’ Roses.”

Exhaling, Harry slumped into the red seat behind him. “More nightmares will come to me now,” he sighed. “More than I previously had.”

“Cry me a river, dickhead,” Beelzebub said, sitting down next to him and stretching his arms out. “So, Boy Who Lived, *Darkslayer*, Harry bleeding Potter, Mr. Twilight, you’re here, courtesy of the centaur’s stash, to discover who you really are.” The dwarf man raised his arms and shook. “Spooky, mystical journey awaits. No doubt with the crap in your head it will also be hilarious and terrifying beyond all reason. What do you say we quit while we’re ahead and go get a beer and some hookers? My treat.”

“You are a strange, strange little man,” Harry decided. “I think one of us is insane, and I know it’s me, so what does that make you?”

“A laugh at parties,” Beelzebub answered. “Come on then,” he sighed. “Shake the dust of your heels, start you engines, ignite the fires and all of that jazz. We’re off!”

The little man grasped Harry’s wrist and his vision exploded with colour. He was thrown across a vast distance, wind howled in his ears and a rainbow of life and death swam before his eyes. It lasted for a few

minutes, in which time didn't matter, and then he was standing in a very dirty room.

There was a chair, an old muggle television set, a window with dusty blinds and strewn about the carpeted floor were pizza boxes and empty beer bottles.

"This is my place," Beelzebub said. "Just got a pick up a few things before we head out to unlock the secrets of the universe. Make yourself at home – I wouldn't sit in my chair if I were you, however, last person who did that was never seen again."

Harry shook his head. He was pretty sure that the centaurs had given him something that caused very vivid hallucinations. He was high, and not on painkillers.

"Ralph, you son of a bitch!" Beelzebub suddenly exclaimed in his high pitched, nasally voice. "When did you get back into town?"

Harry looked over to the dwarf but could not see who he was talking to. There was no one else in the room and—

"Beelzebub, my friend," the *pot plant* resting on the cardboard boxes near the television said. Harry now saw, now that he was looking at it, that the plant was holding a cigarette in its... leaf. "You crazy bastard. I got back just last night – they kicked me out of the west side of the brain so here I am."

"No shit," cursed the little man. "Can I get you a beer?"

"Ah, I drank all you had in the fridge, Beezy," Ralph shrugged. He was a green plant; about two feet high and he had a few buds with orange flowers growing on them. He took a drag of his cigarette, bringing it to the mouth on his stork. Harry also saw that he had teeth, and that there was a dagger resting in the soil of his pot. "Sorry, little dude."

"You're replacing them," Beelzebub snapped, crushing a can

underneath his booted foot. "Harry, get over here and say hello to an old friend of mine."

Willing to expect anything at this point, Harry stepped over a few discarded beer cans and pizza boxes. "Hi," he said to the plant.

"Who's this schmuck?" Ralph said.

Beelzebub chuckled. "This is Harry Potter, Ralph," he said. "He's my latest client on the epic life changing quest for inner peace."

Ralph laughed and a cloud of smoke billowed out of his mouth. "Hahahaha," he croaked. "Better you than me, buddy."

"You two get to know one another," Beelzebub said. "I'll be back in a minute." He disappeared into the adjoining room and Harry could hear him crushing more cans under his feet.

Ralph coughed on his smoke and Harry got the distinct impression that the houseplant was sizing him up. "So," he said, putting his hands in his pockets. "You come here often?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?" Ralph growled, rubbing the end of his cigarette into the soil of his pot. "Make yourself useful, Potter, and get me another smoke!"

Harry wasn't in the mood for this. "No," he said, and turned away.

"Don't mess with me, asshole," Ralph said. "I know your name now, me and the lads will come round your place and ruin your shit."

Harry ignored him and looked around the room with a sigh. Of all the nonsense that had happened to him over the long time he had been alive, this had to be in the top five.

"Hehe," Ralph continued. "I'm just kidding, kid. You're alright. We're gonna be good friends, I think. Here, I'll show you a picture of my last

girl.

Cheap she was, but I picked her up down the west side a few days ago and worked my stuff on her.” Despite himself Harry turned around and saw that the plant was now holding a snapshot between its leaves. It was also snickering. “Here, take a look.”

Harry stepped over to the plant and took the photo from its ‘hand’. He turned it over and cursed. “HEY!” he shouted. The picture was of Ginny, and

Ralph, and he was all over her. “What the hell, plant?”

“Who you calling a plant, human?” Ralph growled and picked up the dagger with his leaf. “I oughta cut you right now. You mess with the bull you get the horns!”

The houseplant suddenly jumped, swinging the dagger through the air. Harry was so shocked by the incredulous sight that he didn’t move, and the dagger cut his left cheek open. He grunted and moved to the side as the bulk of the plant flew by him and hot blood streamed down his face. It stung and felt all too real.

No sooner had he done that than a sharp hot pain dug into the back of his leg as Ralph stabbed the blade in from behind and laughed. “Too good to get me a smoke, asshole. Well... Ralph’s not the one bleeding now.”

Harry spun and kicked the brown pot of the plant with his good leg as hard as he could. Ralph screamed and flipped back through the air; spinning until he hit a wall and slumped down to the floor leaving a long streak of dirt, reminiscent of blood, in a line down the white plaster.

“Ho ho,” Ralph snickered. “You’ll pay for that one. AAAAHHHH!”

However he was doing it, the plant propelled himself through the air again, dagger blazing, and took another swing at Harry. Harry limped out of the way, but tripped over a few of the beer cans and went sprawling down onto the floor. Knowing full well that he could soon be killed by a

houseplant, he crawled forward and....

....noticed an axe lying undisturbed on the floor where it hadn't been a moment ago. It was a simple axe, with the red strip running down the blade. Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Harry picked it up and turned around just as the kamikaze plant came hurtling down through the air at him, screaming death.

Harry swung and caught the plant's brown pot. It shattered in a haze of dirt and old cigarettes. Ralph now screamed as he fell in a heap next to Harry, a cloud of dirt shooting up as he landed. Crawling to his feet, Harry turned onto the now motionless plant and chopped it to pieces with the axe, until nothing bigger than a few leaves remained.

Once he was done, Harry just shook his head and dropped the wooden handle of the axe, falling back against the wall and wiping his face with his sleeve.

"Wow," said Beelzebub, carrying a six pack of beer. "That really escalated quickly. Nice swing with the axe, Potter. Ralph will be feeling that one in the morning. Anyways, I've got the beer he missed so we can get going now. Follow me."

In the Forbidden Forest, within the glade of the centaurs, Bane and Firenze watched as a line of blood appeared on Harry Potter's cheek and began to stream down his face. The injuries suffered in the mind seemed so real to the victim that they were real – magic made it so.

"I wonder what battle he fights with himself?" Bane whispered, his crossbow resting on his shoulder.

"I fear he fights a nightmare or worse," Firenze answered. "I do not think we can begin to understand his mind. He has fought many great battles, Bane, and yet this may be his greatest."

Shuffling on the spot, Harry watched Beelzebub dancing across the edge of the clear crystal bridge they crossed, chugging his beers one by one and singing into the twilight evening.

“Take.... my hand,” he said, deep and with a growl. *“We’re off to never, neverland! WHOO!”*

The little man threw his beer can off the bridge and down into the waters of the glittering sea below.

Harry had blinked and they were on the bridge a few minutes ago, having travelled from Beelzebub’s place and the battle with Ralph. As far as he could tell the bridge stretched north and south to the horizon and beneath them was nothing but a whole load of sparkling ocean, currently being polluted by the dwarf’s beer cans.

“We’re gonna have fun, Harry,” Beelzebub laughed. “I can feel it. So many possibilities with your mind, you know. We could go anywhere and almost any*when*. Yeehaw!”

Harry had tried to speak to Ethan as well, but so far he got no response to the man who lived in his head. He couldn’t say why, but he thought it must have something to do with the fact that he was having this... this... *dream, vision*, in his own head. Ethan would be here somewhere, but the distances in his mind could be huge. He knew that from personal experience....

“I’m all out of love. I’m so lost without you. I know you were right....” Beelzebub had continued to sing and was now pretending to cry as he snapped off another beer.

Harry continued to limp up the bridge, the stab wound from that homicidal plant stinging in his leg. “Where are we going?” he asked. “More importantly, how do I get off this crazy rollercoaster?”

"Say my name. Do do do da do... of a life, so doodoo, you come and ease the pain. Shit, can never remember the words to that. Eh? Where we going? Why, we're going on an adventure – I don't think you've been on enough of them. During this adventure you're supposed to discover the true nature of yourself, who you really are, and that will end the ride."

Harry closed his eyes and counted slowly to ten, trying to calm himself. "As if Voldemort wasn't enough...." he mumbled. "Okay then," he said slowly. "Beelzebub, what's next."

"Meatloaf," the grinning dwarf replied. "Is nothing sacred anymore? Is forever just another word? Or maybe Metallica. So tear me open but beware – the things inside they just don't care. And the pain still takes me... so hold me, until it sleeps...."

"Good God," Harry sighed, rubbing his stubbly cheeks and wincing as he disturbed the cut on his cheek. "That really hurts," he said.

"It should," Beelzebub grinned. "It really happened!"

Before Harry had a chance to digest that, the little man jumped at him and grabbed his wrist and the myriad rainbow of colours exploded before his eyes once again.

"Line up, boys," came a gruff but yet familiar voice. "We're going over the wall."

When Harry opened his eyes he was somewhere else. He was in a trench, and he was dressed in mud-splattered army fatigues. In his hands was a rifle, strapped to his side was a revolver, and around his belt were two standard green grenades. He was also wearing a green helmet, as well as his black bandana. Looking to his left and right he saw that he was one soldier among many, and standing before them in the mud was.... he groaned.

"You chaps are the best of the best. The finest Britain has to offer," Beelzebub said, wearing his own little uniform and the hat of a

commanding officer. He had no rifle, but a pistol was strapped to his belt. "Today, we take back our land and show these scum that the have awoken a sleeping giant."

There was gunfire in the distance, and close by as well. Looking overhead into the twilight sky, thick with cumulus clouds, Harry saw mortar fire and streaks of cannon blasts ricocheting across the vast distance of this trench, and probably no man's land beyond.

The soldiers he was grouped with looked familiar as well. Men he had seen and met over the years he was sure, pulled from his memory, but no one he could name. They all had the look of hardened soldiers, even if some were thin and pale, wearing crosses around their necks and whispering silent prayers.

"We're gonna show these bastards what for, lads," Beelzebub continued to pace back and forth, one hand on his pistol. Something exploded nearby and the ground shook. "That's it, while they think we're dead, over the wall, chaps! Think of your kids back home, and how you'll see them again soon."

Screaming, fear in their eyes – as must be in all soldiers' eyes – the thirty or so men began to run at the ladders against the trench wall. Beelzebub held back, and so did Harry. He was too shocked, too out of it to really comprehend this. Sure, he'd seen his fair share of battles, but this was different.

Soon he stood alone as all the men had climbed out of the trench. Some were still going up the ladders and suddenly the sound of gunfire was a whole lot closer.

"Private Potter!" Beelzebub exclaimed. "Get you ass up that ladder and fight for your country!"

The gun felt heavy in his hands, clunky, but he knew how to use it. Eight shots he'd get before he needed to replace the clip of bullets. Single shot fire and then pull back on the bolt. He had an affinity for most weapons.

He didn't move when Beelzebub – Commander Beelzebub – spoke. The little fellow drew his weapon when he didn't.

“Son, I gave you a direct order. Are you just gonna let those men up there die?” He pointed the pistol at Harry.

Harry decided to forgo the gun and reached for the power to ignite his palms. It was more than enough to handle the dwarf and with any luck could end this *dream*. Shock, and disbelief flashed across his mind when he realised that his power wasn't there – that none of his magic was there.

Beelzebub fired a warning shot over his shoulder, the heat from the bullet zinging passed his ear. “No tricks, soldier,” the little man grinned. “You're gonna fight like the common soldier, like so many of your fellow men that you led into battle. Now get up there and show me what you're made of!”

Not given much choice, Harry began to climb the ladder. Dirt and debris rained down upon him from above, the sound of mortar fire and guns was deafening and overhead he saw planes – bombers – dropping their payload further down the trench. The bombs exploded in a fiery cloud of death and destruction. The muddy walls of the trench shook and he held onto his helmet as he climbed.

It was a thousand times worse over the wall. The ground was littered with the corpses of the dead, some carrying the flag – the Union Jack – and others still grasping their weapons in cold dead hands. Weapons that hadn't fired a single shot before they had been gunned down themselves.

There was no enemy that Harry could see, only a lot of death and destruction. Green army trucks, cars and vans, artillery carriers and even downed planes littered the smoking field as he ran forward, gun raised, towards the group of soldiers that were firing at the unseen foe from behind the cover offered from the vehicles that were now scrap metal.

“CHRIST!” one man yelled. “I CAN’T SEE ‘EM!”

Tracer bullets flew by overhead and even lower, the ground was churned up by the awesome amount of bullets fired from a chain gun up ahead, and

Harry limped as best he could behind cover. The worst wound he had suffered was still from that bloody houseplant – Ralph, who had moved in on

Ginny – and it was slowing him down now.

He felt extremely vulnerable without his magic as well. This was a real battle, a muggle battle, with guns and bombs. He vaguely remembered reading somewhere that the life expectancy of the average soldier that went over the wall in a trench could be quickly counted in seconds.

“Oh Danny boy,” Beelzebub sang, jumping up out of the trench with his gun blazing, firing shots into the distance whilst simultaneously taking swigs from a can of beer. *“The pipes, the pipes are calling. From glen to glen, and down the mountain—YEEOW!”*

A bullet, fired presumably from an enemy somewhere in a distant trench, went straight through the little man’s can of drink, which exploded.

“Okay, you bastards,” Beelzebub growled. “You can kill my men by the thousand, you can bomb my trench to dust that the men dug before they died. But nobody, and I mean nobody, messes with the beer! YOU JUST MADE IT PERSONAL!”

Pulling a grenade from his belt, he bit out the pin and, still screaming to the sky, the dwarf tossed it at the unseen enemy and dived down next to Harry.

A moment later they were showered with dirt and rock.

“HAHAHAHA!” Beelzebub exclaimed. “Having fun, soldier?” he asked Harry. “This is war, this is your life. You and the rest of humanity always turn to war when words will do! How does it feel, komesabe? How does it

feel to be so powerless, and yet still be thrown into the thick of it?”

Bullets impacted off metal and in the mud all around them, and Harry chanced a look over his upturned jeep and saw a few men cut down by tracer fire. Spitfires and Mustangs were engaged in a dogfight overhead. It was war! He couldn't answer Beelzebub.

“Nothing to say, sport?” the dwarf asked, dancing on the spot as he reloaded his six-shooter. “I've lost a lot of good beer out here – we're gonna take a few of those bastards with us. Come on!”

Against his will, and surprising him with his strength, Beelzebub pulled Harry up and together they ran forward passed the still bleeding bodies of the soldiers he had stood in the trench with. Some were still alive and fighting, and now Harry caught glimpses of the gun nests and enemy placements through the jungle of crashed vehicles.

Whatever this war was about, his life was in danger. Taking careful aim and yet still running, Harry fired once, and his shot was perfect – they always were, he had had a lot of practice with guns. It took an unsuspecting enemy soldier in the face, powering through into his brain. He had killed again, and this time just to stay alive.

Pulling the bolt back on the gun, Harry fired again – this time at the man operating the rotating chain gun which had mowed down dozens of soldiers. This shot was on target as well. Ducking down, eyes hard and pain all forgotten, Harry once again pulled the bolt back and marked another soldier.

BANG!

Another life ended.

Beelzebub was laughing, dancing around on the spot. “*Potter, Potter, Potter,*” he now sang. “*War, war, war. Remind me, if you will, exactly what we're fighting for?*”

Diving down behind yet another upturned and smoking truck, Harry saw his clothes were all muddy and that the pain in his leg had doubled from his run. It was nothing compared to the memory of the cruciatus of a day or so ago, but it was constant and distracting.

“I don’t know what we’re fighting for!?” Harry snapped, swinging his rifle so the barrel of the weapon was pointed into the little man’s face. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Beelzebub laughed again. “If *you* can’t tell me then you’re not ready to know. Nice shooting by the way, those guys won’t be going home to their kids.”

“This is a dream....” Harry whispered, dropping the rifle and holding his head in his hands. “An illusion brought on by centaur drugs.”

“You asked for it!” Beelzebub exclaimed. “This is why they tell kids not to do drugs in school.”

Harry cursed, slammed his fist into the undercarriage he was leaning against, and once more picked up his rifle. Ejecting the clip, he put in a fresh one of eight sharp shots. A line of tracer shots cut a path through the truck on his right side, narrowly missing him by mere inches.

“You got that look in your eyes,” Beelzebub whispered, and a sadistic grin spread across his face. “Someone’s about to die.”

Harry stood up, bolting back the rifle, and almost immediately found a target with his weapon. Across the desolate expanse of no man’s land, another enemy soldier had taken up position on the chain gun. Harry fired once, smoothly and looking straight down the sight. The soldier’s face exploded.

Leaning back behind the truck, Harry bolted the rifle again and stood back up, taking careful aim at another unshaven young face. The recoil from the shot dug the end of the rifle into his shoulder, but it was a clean shot – as they all were. Beelzebub was standing next to Harry, shooting

with his revolver. He was shooting at six beer cans that had materialised on the wheel of an overturned military van.

“Gotta shoot something,” he shrugged, as Harry looked down at him. Shaking his head, Harry didn’t flinch as a barrage of shots cut up the front of the truck a few inches away. He saw the shooter, bolted the rifle, and took him out. “Well.... they’ll give you a medal for that,” the little devil laughed. “Come on, let’s charge!”

Harry stepped out from behind the truck, rifle in one hand and he had drawn his revolver with the other. Walking forward, Beelzebub at his side,

Harry fired into the enemy with a cold fury that had seen him topple mountains in the past. Shots rang out around him as the six shots from his revolver found six heads. He tossed it aside, bolted the rifle a clean bullet, and used that.

As if by magic, none of the shots fired towards him got close. Nearby an aircraft slammed down into the ground, a fireball scorching the earth, and

Harry kept on moving. He unclipped a grenade, pulled the pin, and with deadly accuracy threw it into a nest of enemy soldiers.

BOOM!

The soft patter of limbs striking the earth was lost under the renewed explosions of the cannons and the mortar fire directly overhead. The shots left long smoky trails in the twilight sky.

Harry’s rifle ran dry, but he just spun it on his finger and popped another clip, his last, into the chamber.

The gun was hot, almost painfully so, but his next eight shots found their mark, and one enemy bullet sizzled through the air and caught Harry on the shoulder, just glancing his flesh and digging a burrow through it before spinning into the metal piles behind him. He didn’t feel it.

“You’re a one man army,” Beelzebub said, spinning his revolver around his hand. “Killing is what you’re good at, Harry, and you are very, very good at it. But is it who you are?”

The cold rage in Harry’s eyes flickered and died away. He dropped his spent rifle and slumped down into the mud, with its puddles of water that were stained misty red with the blood of so many fallen.

“I am a killer,” he said, and Beelzebub stood close by – mercifully silent for once. “I’ve killed and will continue to kill. But I don’t want to,” he frowned, and turned to face the small creature. “Does that count for anything?”

“Not in death,” was the honest reply.

“We going to get out of here?” Harry asked. “This place is miserable.”

“This is your mind,” replied Beelzebub. “But yeah, this part is done with.”

The little man grasped Harry’s wrist and the world fell away beneath his feet, spinning and churning in a suffocating colourless darkness. When the world blurred back to normality, Harry recognised the ground he stood upon. It was a world he had fought on a long time ago, eighty years at least.

Molten rock streamed by on either side of the hard basalt island he stood upon, and nearby an active volcano spewed forth hundreds of tonnes of ash and magma. The sky was hazy, the sun lost under the smoke, and the landscape as desolate as a war zone.

And then there were the demons, the monsters, surging up and out of the lava – as real and as dangerous as they had been the first time Harry had faced them. Twisted and searing hot forms of men that burnt the rock beneath their feet as they approached from all sides.

Still powerless and now without even a gun to fire – not that it would have done much good against these monsters, Harry began to back

away, coughing on the ash in the air.

“Beelzebub!” he called. The little dwarf was nowhere to be seen. Vicious lightning tore across the sky as Harry called his name. “Where are you?”

Angry more than anything else, Harry continued to back away from the monsters – searching for anything that could help him out of his current problems. His shoulder burned from the shot he’d taken, as did his lower leg and cheek from the slashes of Ralph, the bastard houseplant.

Turning around in a full circle, Harry blinked as he caught sight of something odd descending through the sky from above. Two things, actually, two men flying down towards him with the aid of parachutes. Watching them fall, Harry thought he recognised the smaller figure – it could be no one else – but had no time for the second as suddenly a barrage of laser fire rained down from above.

Spheres of pure white power, fired from the two parachutists, cut down into the rock around Harry and then into the demons of molten rock, who had grown dangerously close. Large chunks of rock splintered away from the beasts as, on either side, Beelzebub and the second man landed, wielding semi-automatic modified weaponry.

“Picked up an old friend of yours,” the little man growled, biting down on a cigar as he fired spheres of power into the roaring demons. “Two, actually.

“Hi, Harry,” grinned Ethan, holding two larger rifles of his own. “What the hell is going on now?”

Cutting away his parachute, which quickly burst into flames when it blew into the lava, Ethan Rafe handed one of his rifles to Harry. He was wearing a backpack over his shirt and jeans, and now a familiar houseplant clawed his way out – toting a small pistol and grinning.

“Our shit’s on pause, Potter,” Ralph said, jumping from Ethan’s bag. Harry could see that his pot had been glued back together, and that

sticky tape was holding his leaves on.

Blinking, Harry sighed and turned towards the fight as more and more white hot fire creatures burst out of the lava and attempted to attack the small group of fighters.

"We've seen some crazy stuff over the years," Ethan said, leaning against Harry's back and he against his, spraying their entire radius with firepower. Beelzebub and Ralph were charging and firing their guns haphazardly. "A hell of a lot of crazy stuff... but this takes the cake. That's a goddamn potted pl—"

"Don't call him that," Harry warned. "He gets a bit... angry and starts stabbing."

Ethan just shook his head and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Whatever you say, mate."

Their fire increased and slowly the group beat back all of the demons, until no more rose from the fiery pits of streaming lava. His gun smoking, Harry looked at Ethan and shrugged as Beelzebub and Ralph waddled back across the island.

"It's all a goddamn mess," Beelzebub growled. "I found this guy swimming around in your head." He nodded to Ethan. "You're lucky we got here when we did, Potter. I'd hate it if something scarred that pretty little face of yours."

Ralph laughed.

"Funny bloke this fellow," Ethan commented, swinging his rifle round between the little man's eyes. "What's going on, Harry?"

"I was drugged," Harry confessed, in a tired voice. "And I apparently have a sick sense of humour. These guys are products of my subconscious."

"A sarcastic little man named after the devil and a talking, chain smoking houseplant?" Ethan raised an eyebrow. "Whatever floats your boat, Harry."

"I apologise for nothing," Harry grinned.

"Who you calling plant, bitch?" Ralph raged.

Oh dear, Harry thought.

Ethan ducked as a stream of power spheres buzzed through the air where his head had been a split second earlier.

"AARRRGHH!" Ralph screamed, and threw himself towards Ethan, levelling the pistol at his head.

Harry caught him halfway with the back end of his rifle, swinging it like a baseball bat, and sent the unfortunate plant spinning through the air again.

This time he landed in a river of molten rock, and promptly burst into flames.

Beelzebub was rolling around on the ground laughing. "It is not Ralph's day," he laughed, chuckling through his cigar. "First chopped to bits and then burnt to ash. I'd watch yourself, Potter, he'll be taking names."

"This," Ethan decided, "is extremely odd... and disturbing."

Harry nodded with a long sigh. "You didn't see Snape, count yourself lucky."

Plumes of smoke and debris were still erupting from the nearby volcano, and a firestorm of lava bombs was shaking the earth beneath their feet as the deadly balls impacted against the ground.

"You discovered inner peace yet?" Beelzebub asked. "Know who you

really are? Hmm?”

Harry shook his head.

“Then we’ve only just begun,” the little man sighed and turned to Ethan. “What about you, Billy No Mates? You want to come along for the ride?”

Ethan frowned and then shrugged. “Why not?” he said.

“Plenty reasons why not,” Beelzebub grinned. “One, it’s probably going to hurt a lot. Two, there will be very little beer. Three, Potter here is piss poor company. Need I go on?”

Harry rubbed the stubble on his chin and yawned. “I could have been a farmer,” he mused. “I could have left the magical world and become a blackberry farmer years ago... but no, here I am....”

“Here you are,” the dwarf agreed, nodding his head sagely. “Through an extremely unlikely turn of events the fate of the free world, of all worlds in all of time in all of existence, rests solely on your shoulders. Makes you feel all warm and fuzzy on the inside to know we got you to rely on.”

“I’m sensing a degree of sarcasm in his tone,” Ethan smiled. “I like this little guy.”

“Shut your mouth, Billy,” Beelzebub stated. “Well, Potter, let’s keep going. I’m sure the answer we’re looking for is in some war or another.”

Shouldering his rifle, Harry nodded and turned away from this battle destroyed world that was tearing itself apart. Perhaps it was a representation of what was really going on in his mind – that he could not be sure of. But he did need to know. For the good of Creation he did need to know who he really was....

And whether there was any hope for the salvation of his soul.

Chapter 18 – A Hand in Fate

But there is suffering in life, and there are defeats. No one can avoid them.

But it's better to lose some of the battles in the struggles for your dreams than to be defeated without ever knowing what you're fighting for.

~~Coelho

“I think there is a big difference between who you are and what you do, Harry,” Ethan said, walking alongside Harry on this infinitely long bridge in his mind. The clear crystal structure stretched away to the horizon, suspended by nothing over a vast twilight strewn ocean.

“Listen to Billy, Potter,” Beelzebub said, dressed once again in his black shirt and tie. At three feet, he wasn’t a very imposing figure, but Harry had seen him fight as well as the rest of them. “He may be on to something.”

“You kill, Harry, but does that make you a killer and only I killer. I think not – you kill to defend the souls that can’t defend themselves. I mean sure, given the right opponent and the right situation, or perhaps the *wrong* situation, I think everyone can be a killer. But only you, across all of time, can fight the things you do.”

Hands in his pockets, a limp in his step, Harry nodded. “If that is true,” he began carefully, “then it means that we, that I, never had a choice in the matter. To kill is very easy, for anyone. To live with it, might be a challenge. Everything begins with a choice, Ethan. It’s what makes us who we are.”

“Which, of course, is why we’re all here,” Beelzebub stated. “Who are

you, Harry Potter? Where are you going? What are your goals in life?"

"What does it matter?" Ethan asked, despairing of this whole dream world. "We'll slay the dragon, rescue the princess and be home in time for tea – that's what's important."

Beelzebub looked as if he was regretting bringing Ethan along, and contemplating throwing him over the side of the bridge. "It matters, boy," he growled. "This lad has power – power enough to wipe away a galaxy, to swallow planets, to end *all* of life – and he doesn't understand why he has it, where it came from, who he is to use it! He's an arsonist, given not a match but an atom bomb – perhaps he'll do the right thing, perhaps he'll blow up a city!"

"I don't intentionally want to hurt anyone," Harry said.

"And yet you do, Potter, you do," Beelzebub laughed. "Whether you want it to happen or not thousands die for just being near you. It happened the other day, in that city – you can name countless other times. How does that feel?"

Harry stared out over the endless ocean, perhaps looking for an answer out there that wasn't as terrible as the first that had popped into his head. There was nothing out there. "I don't feel anything," he said. "Not a damn thing one way or the other."

Beelzebub nodded, as if he had expected that. "You learnt anything yet on this crazy ride through your subconscious? Anything at all?"

Harry smiled. "That my mind is a very disturbing place... and suffers from briefs attempts at humour."

"Very brief," the little man agreed. "And deeply confusing. But it shows one thing, at the least."

"What?" asked Ethan.

“That he’s still human,” Beelzebub nodded, gazing at Harry. “That there is hope for him yet. You didn’t get it all,” he cackled.

“What’s that mean?” Ethan turned to Harry.

Harry shook his head. “He means that I didn’t kill all of my emotions, all of my humanity, to survive. Came pretty damn close though, I reckon.”

“But is that important?” Beelzebub continued. “What is the worth of anything you do, anything that anyone does? We’re all destined for the grave, Potter. You as well, given time.”

“The worth is in the intent,” Harry replied without hesitation. He had had a lot of time in long empty years to think this through. It had been an attempt to justify his life’s dark deeds. “In the act, in my promise to do the right thing. Even if it doesn’t last, and darkness undoes it, the fact that it happened in the first place is worth enough.”

Beelzebub grinned and that could have meant anything. “I think,” he said slowly, “you’re on the right track.”

There was a flash of deep white light, a harsh laughter rang out in Harry’s ears, and he stood not upon the bridge but upon a vast balcony overlooking a shining silver city. Skyscrapers that did, indeed, seem to scrape the sky glittered in the soft light of the evening – in twilight, of course – in the largest city Harry had ever seen.

Etoch, it had been called, and he had visited it about fifty years ago. Looking up into the sky, Harry saw the streaks of smoke and the bitter trails of intercontinental ballistic missiles. ICBMs. He was standing only moments before the impressive and quietly beautiful city exploded into the radioactive flames of chaos.

Every world he visited, if not barren and desolate, had been engaged in some type of conflict. Every single one had been at war with either itself or monsters. Chaos had followed him and even overtook him on his long march across existence. Entropy, the inevitable decay of a society, had

accelerated when his scar link tore a hole through the Ways of Twilight.

“In a few minutes,” Harry said, turning around on the marble balcony to face Ethan and Beelzebub. “This is not going to be a very happy place.”

Even now, far in the distance, they could hear the sounds of battle, of gun fire and explosions. Light flared on the horizon and smoke quickly followed. For this world it was Armageddon.

“So you just gonna kick back and watch the madness?” Beelzebub asked. “Do you know how many people live in this city?”

“Countless innocent millions,” Harry muttered, with a careless shrug. “That’s always the way of it – there are a lot of them and they’re mostly innocent.”

“People with lives, families, little kiddies. It’s gonna go up in smoke!”

Harry’s eyes flashed in the twilight. “I know,” he growled, his fists clenched in rage. “I watched it happen once before. I stopped it from happening at the Ways of Twilight.”

That made Beelzebub smile... darkly... and his own little eyes narrowed. “But you hold a dark suspicion that you did more damage than good at the Ways, don’t you?”

Ethan looked at him and Harry couldn’t meet his gaze. He turned away as a fresh line of nuclear missiles streamed overhead, and the sky suddenly became littered with enemy jet aircraft. Shockwaves as these planes broke the sound barrier shook the shining city and shattered thousands of panes of glass. It had begun.

“What’s he talking about?” Ethan asked.

Harry sighed as the bombs started to drop, as the world began to fall apart around them. “History is doomed to repeat itself,” he said. “By changing time in the mortal realms I sentenced existence to a slower

death at the hands of the Destroyers... and probably Voldemort.”

“You’re making it sound like you’ve already lost.”

Have I lost? Harry wondered. *Have I... failed?*

There was a whistling from up above and the three of them looked up to see an awesome sight. Dozens of sharp missiles were raining down upon the city, falling in groups and alone. Feeling his strength returned to him, Harry growled and waved his hand through the air, cutting a path.

Sparks jumped between his fingers and a rush of power jumped from his arm in a long, swinging arc that rocketed outwards towards the sky and across the breadth of the empiric city. The missiles were washed away in this growing shield, exploding against it uselessly or just caught spinning and spinning as the power wave expanded.

Not a one struck the shining silver towers, but the sky and surrounding country was decimated with the blasts, radiated from the exposure, and blinded with the light of a hundred warheads exploding as one.

“Great,” Beelzebub sighed. “Now a big, angry nuclear cloud is going to descend on this fair town. You’ve turned a quick fiery death into a slow painful one.”

Harry blinked. “I have, haven’t I... shit.”

The tired and dark look on Beelzebub’s face slowly turned darker, and then mischievous. “But then... you have every right to, don’t you, Darkslayer?

It is you who gets to decide who lives and who dies – not even Death could fault you there, and he tried.”

<There will come a time, Darkslayer, when it will not only be wrong, but pointless, to defy me>

Harry shuddered. “Yeah, I remember,” he said. “He stabbed me with his

scythe... and I pulled it out. Death wasn't too happy about that."

"It wasn't your time," Ethan whispered, as the smoke and radioactive clouds began to roll over the city. Screams, explosions and crashes, and dreadful silence were all that could be heard. "We might want to get out of here...."

Beelzebub was jumping around in circles, biting down hard on his cigar. "What have we learnt this time, Harry?" he asked.

Harry snorted. "That no matter what I do... innocent people will always pay the price."

"We're having fun, aren't we?" Beelzebub grinned. "Fasten your seatbelt, Mr. Twilight, things are about to get fast."

The world faded and Harry blinked inside of a white sphere of dazzling light. He blinked again and was lying on his back, staring up at a dirty grey ceiling, lit by one dull bulb. Sitting up, he looked in a daze around the very familiar room he was in, looked out the nearby window just to confirm his suspicions, and then collapsed back onto the bed and began to laugh hysterically.

Although it had been over one hundred years since he had set foot in it, and although it had been annihilated by Voldemort, Harry's memory recalled in perfect detail his small bedroom at Number Four Privet Drive. All of his cousin Dudley's old and broken possessions littered the room. His trunk sat at the foot of the bed and even the blasted calendar, on which he counted down the days until his return to Hogwarts, was pinned to the wall.

"Ah... memories," he sighed, jumping out of the bed and gazing out of the window at Privet Drive. It was early evening, twilight, and the calm that this street had always existed in was firmly in place.

"Beelzebub?" he called, turning around in the room and nearly tripping over his old Nimbus broomstick. "Please explain, Beelzebub. What does

this mean? What does any of it mean?"

He went over to the door and found it locked – from the outside. Smiling as he remembered the locks his relatives had placed on the door, Harry wrenched it clean out of the frame with one good tug and stepped out into the hallway. The house was as he remembered it, right down to the stairs that creaked and the marks on the wall.

He made his way to the kitchen, having to open the door there as well, but it was empty. Biting his lip thoughtfully, Harry checked the living room and found it the same. Immaculately clean but entirely deserted. He was about to leave, about to open the front door, when he heard someone sneeze.

It came from the cupboard under the stairs. Turning back around, Harry saw his old 'bedroom' had been bolted shut. Slowly now, he undid the latch and slipped the bolt out, curious as to who would be inside. He found himself, as he had looked one hundred and six (*just six?*) years ago.

Messy black hair pointing ever which way, glasses askew on his face, pale, skinny and wearing tattered old clothes, Harry knelt down in front of the cupboard as his younger self gazed up at him curiously.

"Hello, Harry," he said.

"Who... who are you?" the ten year old Harry Potter asked, genuine curiosity in his emerald eyes.

The older Harry, the real Harry, oddly felt nothing as he gazed at what he once was. "I am what you will become," he replied. "I'm the bright future you always wanted. Its all sparkles and fireworks from here on out, kid."

Harry smiled... and Harry smiled as well. "Not much time is left, Darkslayer," the younger Harry said.

Older (*much* older) Harry nodded slowly. "I'm inclined to agree with you."

“Do your best with what time you have – no one can fault you on that.”

Harry's vision slowly faded, and the world around him was spinning faster and faster until all he could see was a dash of spinning colour that forced him to close his eyes. One thing was not moving though, and that was Beelzebub. The little man was standing next to him, holding a new six pack of beer and grinning.

Suddenly the spinning of the world got a whole lot more... forceful, and Harry felt as if he were caught in a whirling tornado of half glimpsed worlds and forgotten dreams. Only it also felt like he didn't move at all, and still Beelzebub grinned up at him.

“Look out, Dorothy,” the little man winked. “This ain't Kansas anymore.”

A harsh screaming filled Harry's ears and he cupped his hands over them, probably screaming himself but the sound was lost. It didn't matter – it never mattered!

Raindrops were falling on his head when he opened his eyes, standing quite symbolically on a yellow brick road. Clean cut fields, cornfields, the storks swaying gently in the breeze, were all he could see for as far as he could see.

A motor engine roared behind him and Harry jumped off the path as Beelzebub came storming through on a motorcycle, horn blaring and driving goggles firmly in place. He spun on the wheels, white smoke and burning rubber marked the yellow brick road, and a sidecar simply materialised out of the air.

“Jump in, Dorothy, we're off to see the wizard,” Beelzebub grinned.

Shaking his head, Harry sat down into the sidecar with a sigh. “Why not?” he said. “Why we going to see the wizard?”

“Are you kidding!?” Beelzebub exclaimed. “We're gonna rob the bearded

bastard. What are you packing?"

Harry blinked. "I—" He lifted his hands and wasn't the least bit surprised to see he was holding a double barrelled sawn-off shotgun. The muggle variety – no crazy modifications on this weapon. "I got this," he said, swallowing slowly. "Fully loaded, I reckon."

The two of them took off down the yellow brick road, alongside the wavy cornfields and under the unchanging blue sky. "Billy Boy Ethan is off battling space monsters," Beelzebub said, gunning the bike for all it was worth. Harry had no problem hearing him, however. A quirk of reality in this place of illusion.

"So tell me, Harry," the dwarf-man grinned after they had travelled a fair distance and the scenery had not changed the slightest. "Are you ever afraid, old chap?"

No need to think about that one. "Not of what I fight... but of the damage I could do, yes," he replied. "It may have been better if I'd just died a long, long time ago... someone else may have defeated Voldemort eventually."

"Ah, but you never run away, do you, Darkslayer," Beelzebub continued. "You stand your ground, as anyone worth a damn would. Here, let's pull over and have a look at the graveyard."

Harry frowned. "What graveyard – all I see is corn—" The corn was gone and Harry didn't see it go. Now, as far as the eye could see, stretched grey and old tombstones rotting in the sun or locked with brambly vines. The graveyard of Harry's mind was an awfully full place.

"Oh, look," Beelzebub said with false surprise. "There's a funeral going on right now. I wonder who you're burying."

There was indeed a group of mourners standing all dressed in black around a freshly dug grave. A shiny sandalwood coffin hung suspended above the hole in the earth and a marble tombstone stood tall, the last

marker for the dead. Beelzebub pulled right up alongside the grave, and none of the several dozen people there seemed to take notice.

Harry jumped out of the sidecar, curious as to whose funeral this was. He moved through the crowd without drawing attention, Beelzebub at his side.

No one spoke, it was all too silent, and Harry simply clicked his teeth together when he saw the name on the tombstone.

Harry James Potter

1980 – The End

Gone away owing more than he could pay.

“Well that rhymes,” Beelzebub decided. “Oh look, Potter, someone is going to say a few words.”

Harry pulled his gaze away from the words etched into the marble and turned to follow Beelzebub back a few steps so he could get a look at this person. He began to recognise a few of the mourners as well. Dumbledore was there, as were the Dursleys, Ron, Hermione, the entire Weasley flock, dozens of his old Hogwarts friends, Ethan Rafe, a few dozen of the people he had met along the years including Sarah the nurse, and Tarishma the warrior.

Harry laughed when he saw who was going to be speaking at his funeral. Lord Voldemort stood at the head of the coffin, resting his skeletal hand lightly on the brass handle.

“Harry and I were always close,” Voldemort began, a tear falling from his flaming red eye. “Many enemies came and went over the years but Potter always managed to hold on that extra second, to escape me in some unexpected and spur of the moment type way.”

Others were crying, some were smiling, and everyone was nodding.

"I killed my only son for siding with Potter and the Light," Voldemort continued. "I'd kill all of you here for more power, and I think Harry would understand that. He wasn't like the rest of us, was Harry. Some called him a madman, others called him a hero. But I like to think that there was a spark in Potter that could never die out, no matter how long and hard I tortured him or killed his surviving family members."

"It's true," Vernon Dursley wept, sniffing into a handkerchief. "He killed us and Harry just smiled and kept on trucking. He was such a little trooper. I only wish I'd mistreated him more...."

Feeling rather out of place at his own funeral, Harry glanced back at the tombstone. It had changed.

Harry James Potter

1980 – God knows?

Aged 117 – Only the Good Die Young

"I always thought Harry had a way with words," Hermione said, now standing in Voldemort's place. The Dark Lord was mingling amongst the crowd, and a storm cloud was following him around. "He was funny and articulate, but never let it go to his head. He was the kind of guy that people wanted to be around – because he had strength of character, he was leader, and you can't fake that."

The top of his coffin was suddenly littered with dying white roses, wilted and burning around the edges of the petals. If it meant something, something symbolic, it was lost on Harry, who had pulled himself up to sit on the top of his own headstone. A headstone which now read...

Harry James Potter

1980 – Till the cows come home

He kept trying to get better at it

"I never had a rabbit," Luna Lovegood said, sporting her Gryffindor lion's hat and her butterbeer jewellery. Her dirty blond hair flowed down to her waist and her eyes, those pale pools, looked not at the coffin but up at the real Harry swinging his legs against the tombstone. "But Harry was close enough. What with his furry ears and cute pink nose... I'm fairly certain that Harry would have made less of an impact on the world had he been a rabbit."

There were tearful nods at this, as if it made a whole world of sense. Compared to the rest of this crazy dream trip Harry guessed it did.

"Keep on rockin', Harry," Luna continued, still staring at him. "In death, you may find calm but certainly not peace."

Harry blinked. The headstone changed yet again.

Harry James Potter

1980 – You figure it out, buggered if I can!

He's all dressed up with no place to go.

"I remember this one time Harry and I went out on the town," Ron said, laughing and crying. "We picked up these girls – at least they looked like girls, and Harry blah blah blah box of old spandex and a blah blah blah blah watched a Death Eater swallow a canary whilst dancing to the blah blah blah...."

"I think the drugs must be wearing off," Harry whispered down to Beelzebub, smiling as Ron continued to speak but say absolutely nothing.

"Or maybe you just don't want to hear what he has to say...." the little man replied.

Larry Barry Gary

1980 – Time flies

He was God's bitch. And Fate's doormat.

"One thing I remember most fondly about Harry," Ralph the houseplant said, resting on the lid of the coffin, "is the moment he died. Who would've thought, after surviving so much, that he'd eat a bad piece of fish and choke on it? I didn't see it coming, and I wasn't his friend. In fact, I'm glad he's dead. How poetically ironic... it makes you think...."

Harry sighed and looked up into the blue clear sky and watched it wash away into twilight. The first star of the night wasn't a star, but the planet Mars – the planet of war shone brightly with her eternal radiance.

"I will say this for Potter though," Ralph continued. "He had balls – big balls. There wasn't anything he was afraid of. The pair on this guy were so big that you could almost guarantee he was going to defy whatever stood against him. Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing is all a matter of your perspective – I'm not here to tell you what Potter was. You have to make up your own damn mind about that."

Harry 'Twilight' Potter

Once – Never

This story may go on forever

"What am I learning this time, Beelzebub?" Harry asked his short companion.

???

????-????

??????????

“You suspect that all of your defiance,” Beelzebub said, “may have been compliance. Hey, that rhymes. The Darkslayer Prophecy, *was raised to be the Right Hand of God*. Has your life, has *everything* you are and ever done been on the whim of a God that needed your help....? Its food for thought.”

<Insert Name>

<Date> - <Date>

<Epitaph>

“I’m not a pawn,” Harry growled. “I’m not....”

Beelzebub snorted. “Even if a pawn becomes a king, Potter, it is still just a playing piece.”

The Darkslayer

1980 – Until it is done

He’s the last hope for the living

“Endless battles, impossible wars, tireless struggles....” Harry sighed. “I’ve seen and done it all and I am tired. I’ve a tiredness of the soul, of the mind, that death could not cure. Who am I? When will I die? Beelzebub, you got a beer?”

Beelzebub winked. “Thought you’d never ask,” he whispered, and chucked a can of beer up into Harry’s open hands.

Bringer of Chaos

Beginning – End

He was everywhere in between

"I loved Harry," Ginny Weasley said. "And he knew it. I was one of the few that loved him, one of the few that cared. There was a tenderness about him, something that could not be destroyed no matter how much he suffered. The power the Dark Lord knew not... a power to love through even a soul as black as the night."

Harry was quiet as he gazed upon Ginny, her eyes wet with tears and her body shaking in the small breeze. He slowly sipped his beer and sighed into the air.

"If he ever had a fault, it was that he was too forgiving," Ginny continued. "I think given a choice between the world and me, he would choose me – and be damned for it. God and Harry never saw eye to eye on a lot of things, and I'm fairly sure Satan learnt to fear him. A lot of people died, a lot of people will die – they will be the lucky ones."

Harry James Potter

1980 – 1998

He was only human

Dumbledore began to play a big set of bagpipes as the coffin was finally lowered into the cold earth for eternity. Beelzebub was dancing to the sound of the pipes amongst the white roses on the lid of the coffin, doing a few flips and kicking his legs high into the air.

"He is an Englishman," sang Beelzebub, winking at Harry as he flipped through the air and slowly sank into the earth. *"For he himself has said it, and it's greatly to his credit, that he is an Englishman."*

The dozens of mourners joined in with the little devil. *"That he is an Englishman!"*

Beelzebub continued solo. *"For he might have been a Roosian, a French, a Turk, or Proosian, or perhaps Itali-an."*

Everybody. *“Or perhaps Itali-an.”*

“But in spite of all temptations,” Beelzebub was building up to a crescendo, Harry saw. *“To belong to other nations. He remains an Englishman! He remains an Englishman!”*

Harry drained his can of beer and crushed it in his hand, tossing it aside as the coffin was fully lowered and the dirt began to fall in on either side. “Well at least it didn’t get weird this time,” he shrugged, jumping down off his tombstone and gazing at his epitaph a final time.

Harry James Potter

1980 – FOREVER!

It will never be over, not for him.

“Scowling won’t help you, Harry,” Beelzebub chuckled. “Nothing will change for the better in anger.”

“That was surprisingly wise,” Harry replied, as the world melted and a new one was born in a heartbeat. He now stood upon another long, empty road – one of millions in his mind that led nowhere and everywhere. Stars blanketed the dark sky. “You’re right, of course.”

Beelzebub nodded. “What is right? Who’s right? It is all perspective again, Harry, all perspective. Do you think Voldemort considers himself the villain of this story?”

Harry shrugged. “Madmen rarely do... so what does that make me?”

“We’re trying to find that out!” Beelzebub exclaimed. “You try to do the right thing, Potter, I know you – I am part of you – and I’ve seen you try... but this happens.”

Beelzebub flung his arm towards the night sky, blazing with stars, and like a television screen a memory played out. It was of Harry’s fight with

Allarius, round two, on the world with the city that they had destroyed. Harry watched his face move from passive to beyond angry as the demon murdered the innocent to reach him. He sent a beam of power in Allarius's general direction, and it toppled skyscrapers – killing thousands.

"Was that the right move?" Beelzebub asked. "Thousands died in a heartbeat on your choice. Allarius wasn't even scratched."

Harry watched the image in the sky fade away. "I did what I had to," he sighed. "I've no excuse. The innocent usually pay for the ambition of the powerful."

"You live with that," the little man continued, removing a fresh can of beer from his pocket and pulling the tab. "You destroyed billions of lives, and yet returned them to life at the Ways of Twilight – you saved humanity and every mortal creature... but now, now they are doomed to an even slower and *final* death at the hands of an army you also returned to life at the Ways."

"There was no choice."

"Allarius is back, Harry, *Allarius!* And he's as pissed as all hell. This time he is going to rain down from the sky, tear open the Boundary and, in the form of billions of Destroyers, waste this world and universe. All for you, always for you."

Harry shook his head. "That won't happen – I won't let it."

Beelzebub laughed, throwing back his head and downing the beer. Foam dribbled down his beard and onto the dark, endless road. "You're only human, Harry, only human. You bleed, you die. It will happen – no one knows their death before they meet it – and what will the infinite number of souls, of your race, have left then? Are you still a hero?"

Harry threw up his hands and turned away, gazing out into the darkness he was sure represented the uncertain future. "What is a hero?" he

asked, bitterly. "I'm both light and dark, good and evil, right and wrong. Opposites, opposites, opposites, Beelzebub! I am what I am, and nothing can change that."

Beelzebub's eye blazed with fury. "Look at the road you've walked!" he cried, throwing his can aside and pushing Harry behind the knees so he turned and looked back down the winding path that was his life. It was littered now, and once again quite symbolically, with the corpses of millions of creatures – millions of opposites. These beings had been both light and dark, too. A red haze hung over the horizon, as the pale light of dawn rose in the distance.

"You've walked through that! Waded through an ocean of blood, sweat and tears, Potter!" Beelzebub seemed to shake with anger. "FOR WHAT?

FOR WHO? FOR LOVE? You beat all the odds, you've won every hand but the last, and now your enemies are holding all the aces. Is it time for the great Harry Potter to lie down and die!?"

Harry clenched his fists. "I'll die fighting, little man," he growled. "If not this fight then the next, or the one after that. When does it end? Is Creation so *fucked* up that I have to live again, do it all again, for an extra few bitter years of existence before the next threat, the next evil, tries to destroy us all. It is, Beelzebub, it is... and I'm tired of it. I'll end it this time or destroy it all myself, because too much blood has been spilt. One life, one soul, was too high of a price for whatever force deemed this game necessary."

"Spoken like the true Darkslayer you are," Beelzebub grinned. "You're a living contradiction, Harry. You yourself are an opposite of yourself. Did you hear what you just said?" He threw up his hand and the last few moments played out in the sky, on the screen of stars. Harry's voice bellowed across the cosmos.

"I'll end it this time or destroy it myself, because too much blood has been spilt."

Silence. Deafening.

“End it yourself....?” Beelzebub whispered. “After fighting so hard and so long to save it will you be the one to finally call the game off? I think so, because I know when you’re lying and I know when you’re utterly serious, as you are now. Forces beyond us, beyond mortals, set this in motion aeons ago – will the Boy Who Lived rob them of their sport? Oh, I hope so. But then what?”

Harry smiled sadly. “After all of that... After everything! I’m thinking... two and a half kids, a house with a white picket fence and a job nine to five for forty or so years before retirement.”

“Could you live such a life?” Beelzebub asked, genuinely curious.

Harry sighed and shook his head. “No,” he said, “but it is a nice dream.”

“Then what is left for the Boy Who Lived once his war is over?”

Harry didn’t know. He truly didn’t... and said as much.

“Time will tell, I reckon,” Beelzebub nodded. “Yes, it will.”

Harry began to feel cold and his gaze was infinitely sad as he looked down the road once again at the sea of corpses, swarmed over by dark-eyed carrion eaters. He very quickly decided he wanted to leave. “Let’s go somewhere else,” he said.

Beelzebub grinned and clicked his fingers. The red and desolate sky of the death road was replaced by a shining bright and inviting light in a clear blue sky, drifting over a field of thornless and dew covered white roses that were swaying and seemed to be singing softly in a slight breeze. Almost all of the tension Harry felt before now drifted away as he sighed and basked in the calming nature of the roses.

He wasn’t alone, either.

"Care to dance, Harry?" Ginny asked him, her eyes as bright as the world he now stood in. She was beautiful, young and vibrant. Over her lithe body she wore a strapless white dress and her feet were bare as she stepped through the roses and took his hand, placing her other on his shoulder. He held her waist and they waltzed slowly amongst the flowers. She rested her head against his chest.

"This is a dream," he whispered. "But one I can live with."

"Don't spoil it," she chided, but with laughter in her voice. "It is as real as any reality you've visited... or destroyed. Anyway, you promised me cake in Paris, Mr. Potter."

Harry laughed, his own cheek resting against the top of Ginny's head. Her hair smelt of flowers, of the roses. Everything was roses – all that mattered, all that was, and that was left to die. "I'm afraid I don't know what Paris looks like," he whispered. "Life never took me there."

Ginny sighed. "No matter. It is the thought that counts. The worth is in the deed, in the thought. You've done all right there, you know."

"Where's the worth in a crazy centaur induced drug trip?" he wondered out loud. "I can't figure out half of what I've seen, can you? I mean a homicidal plant and an alcoholic dwarf... I worry about my head sometimes, Gin."

"Well I'm in here so it's not all bad."

And just like that she disappeared. Harry stood alone in the field as the white roses faded to black and roiling storm clouds tortured the sky. It began to rain, and yet Harry just stood there, trying to remember the smell of the roses and the sound of Ginny's voice. He was utterly spent and alone.

Ginny has a part to play, he thought, soaked now from head to toe. Beelzebub was nowhere to be seen and Harry did not particularly care if he came back or not. *She's been dragged into it... as have Ron and*

Hermione.

Harry had not forgotten that whilst he was missing for the two months he had had his memories blocked, that his friends had been connected to him in some unfathomable way. They had felt his bruises – Ron had even shown a few of his own. There was even that dream that was not quite a dream.

He had stepped over Ginny in a world of darkness, his swords drawn, and destroyed something of evil.

She had been real there – so had he and so had the creature.

They were all connected. It was all connected right down to the small coincidences in his life that he no longer noticed or even cared about. All that mattered now, and really all that had ever mattered, was saving the world so that the dream of reality could live on in some form. So that humanity, and all of its beauty and terror, its love and hate, could exist!

That was worth fighting for....

But for once Harry knew he wasn't fighting alone. It had been... ordained, he supposed, and all part of this goddamn Darkslayer burden. All part of some.... big plan. He remembered:

"I knew His faith in a mortal human was not misplaced," Ginny mused to herself, care and tenderness in her eyes. "One day you will have need for us again, but it will be harder next time – the True Magic source has almost run dry since the Beginning, and the fall of the Creator – this has drained it further to almost nothing... it will be your task to replenish it when you are done with war. Do you understand?"

Only it hadn't been Ginny – only a representation by some being that lived beyond his understanding and reach. She... it... had appeared in a friendly form as Harry lay almost defeated and dead on the field he destroyed Allarius upon. He wept then but he did not weep now. There were no tears left in him.

Did he understand? At the time he thought he did, but it was questionable if he was ever supposed to. ***Destiny*** stood behind his name, behind *Potter*... at the centre point of Creation, at the Ways of Twilight. But that was clouded in his mind... a lost memory of a time best left unknown.

"I...." Harry said slowly, opening his eyes and willing the rain to stop falling. A beam of pure sunlight broke through the clouds and lit up his face with an ethereal glow. "I am the Darkslayer. I am the Hand of God."

That was who he was, who he was born to be. Death to anyone who stood in his way. His heart was not pure, neither was his soul – both were damned and that was painfully ironic given who he was. But he had long since learnt that Existence had a sick sense of humour.

A familiar voice suddenly interrupted his thoughts.

"Before the face of God we duelled," Beelzebub whispered, looking down and reading from a thick tome bound in red leather. "And tore asunder the heavens. God himself smiled and waved. A small smile... as if He knew a secret we did not."

The rain fell on Harry's face and he hurt – an age old pain than never truly left him. "What is that you're reading?" he asked the dwarf.

Beelzebub smiled and turned away before answering. "It's called *The Defiance of the Hero*. Quite long and boring but with a few kickass fight scenes in it."

Harry felt different than he had done so far in this mind trip. He felt he had come to a great revelation, had accepted a truth that had haunted him for an eternity. He had a purpose beyond countless and mindless battles for all of time – he had to end the madness.

"How does it end?" he asked Beelzebub.

"Not happily – never that, but with hope that the hero, who seemed more

like a villain at times, could be redeemed. There was no love interest in it, though, and almost all of the main characters died in horrifically painful ways.”

Harry grinned and his eyes flashed. “Sounds like a waste of time and paper. Who’s it written by?”

Beelzebub raised a bushy eyebrow as he scanned the title page. “On the cover here,” he said, “it just says it’s written by ‘A Loser’ and that’s a direct quote. How unfortunate....”

Harry had already lost interest in the book. “Did I ever tell you that I’m the Hand of God, Beelzebub?”

Beelzebub sniffed and shrugged, tossing the book aside. “Please, it’s all the crazy characters in the left side of your brain talk about. You’d think they’d have something better to do with their time.”

Harry felt that it was time for the crazy vision quest thing to end. He didn’t know how much time had passed both in here and in the outside world, but there was a war – the Last War – going on out there. And it couldn’t be any more insane or dangerous than where he was now.

“This wacky episode is done with, Beezy,” Harry smiled, silhouetted against the roiling storm clouds by the thin beam of sunlight. The black roses seemed to wilt as he spoke. “I know enough about myself to be getting on with... to do what has to be done.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Beelzebub scowled at him, a hand on his hip and the other stroking his beard.

Harry inclined his head, nodding shortly. “I’m not a hero, but I get the job done. My soul may be damned and I have no control whatsoever over my existence after I die – and I will, I know that. Hell may be my eternity or perhaps blissful nothingness. Compared to this world and reality that I have been *forced* to take responsibility for, I welcome death.”

Beelzebub nodded in agreement. "You and Death never saw eye to eye, however. There's that to think on." One of those slow, mischievous grins that

Harry had come to hate spread across Beelzebub's face a moment later. "And there is something final, as well. Something your subconscious has realised – has really always known – but that you've either ignored or denied. Do you know what I'm talking about, Darkslayer?"

Shaking his head, Harry replied, "I don't."

Beelzebub chuckled. "Search that blackened husk you call a soul. Dig deep, Mr. Hand of God, and you'll see that not everything is as it seems."

Harry glared. "Stop speaking in riddles, little man. What do I know?"

Moving his hand, Beelzebub raised his middle finger at Harry. He held it for a moment and then raised the remaining four fingers. Well, three fingers and a thumb. He stared at his hand and then at Harry as if, once again, this made all the sense in the world.

"Your hand...." Harry shrugged. "I don't see—"

Harry paled. In one instant it had all been made clear to him and he could have wept if there were tears of sadness left in him. But there were not – he had lost the ability to cry in sorrow. He had never been able to cry in joy, so that was of no consequence.

But the hand, dear Merlin, the hand. It made too much sense... after so long. If it were true, and Harry knew it was, then he was supposed to make it to the Ways of Twilight. He was supposed to start this war, recreate the Destroyers and lead the Light against Voldemort and his all too powerful enemies. It had meant to happen!

"What does a hand have, Harry?" Beelzebub said. The little man's voice sounded mocking to his ears.

Harry's lips moved soundlessly for a moment, and then he closed his

eyes and clenched his fists. "Fingers," he spat, he raged, he cried. "A hand has fingers... separate digits that are part of the whole but individual from each other."

"Exactly.... Oh, exactly," Beelzebub laughed. "You always were quick on the uptake. So... Darkslayer, Boy Who Lived, Johnny Twilight, Mr. Hand of God – who do you think you've pulled down into this crazy maelstrom of death and endless war with you?"

Harry's eyes seemed to die as he thought of it, of the answer he had long searched for but now, he realised, had feared knowing. A hand had fingers... he was the Hand of God, but only one of the fingers on that hand. Perhaps the most important digit – the thumb, even, but still only one of five. At that moment lightning, purple and green, tore across the heavens, reflecting the anger he felt.

He remembered:

You," he said to Ginny, and then turned to look at Ron and Hermione as well. "You three, are important in this fight in a way I don't even know yet, but you are."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked.

"The dreams and bruises, Ron," Harry replied. "You felt them when I was a prisoner. We're connected, for some reason, and I think it means we have to stick together - four parts of a whole - so I'll never be far away."

Ah, why did Fate keep burning him like this? Where was the end? It seemed he had been asking himself that question his entire life, and like in the previous one hundred and seventeen years, his answer was only painful silence.

"We are connected," he said, as if dead, to Beelzebub. "Each a finger of the Hand of God. Each with their own part to play. God, I hate you," he finished weakly. "Ron... Hermione... *Ginny*. This is not fair...."

Beelzebub came to his side and raised four fingers. "You, Potter, make one – add your three friends and you get four fingers. Who is the fifth

digit, the fifth individual destined to fight the greatest threat to Creation? Think about it....”

Harry knew before Beelzebub finished speaking, and he turned as a strong hand clapped him on the shoulder.

“I guess I make five,” Ethan Rafe said, thunderous insanity reflected in his eyes from the tormented sky above. “Who would have thought we’d make it this far?”

Five humans – two of them with broken souls – against the might of the Final War, the Last Battle for Creation. Mortal, yet held fast by an unbreakable set of morals and belief in what is right and what is unchangingly wrong.

Existence could have done a lot worse than Harry Potter and his small, tired group of friends.

Deep within the Forbidden Forest, Firenze and Bane took a few unconscious steps back as Harry’s eyes opened with a glint of determination burning as strong as the sun within them. He was bruised and bleeding and rose silently before the sparkling moonlit lake. Firenze felt no surprise that he had survived the dream journey.

The young man before them said nothing as he gazed out at the tranquil lake, its surface perfectly smooth and an identical mirror image of the night sky high above. Slowly a white light surrounded the boy, flowing gently across his skin and no doubt flashing across his eyes. Small blue sparks jumped across this light, only scarcely containing the awesome strength sealed within the human.

“We’re gonna keep on rockin’, Firenze,” Harry finally said. He smiled – it was not comforting. It was terrifying. “I will count the centaurs as my allies. You will fight before the end... or be swept away with the rest. I am truly sorry.”

The air shifted, reality folded, and Harry Potter disappeared.

Chapter 19 – Plans of the Light and of the Dark

No sympathy. No eternity.

~~Nightwish

After leaving the Forbidden Forest with a new sense of who he was, and what he still had left to do, Harry materialised in the kitchen of the Black Manor he had called home these last few weeks. In real time he had left it only about two and a half hours ago, telling his friends he would be back soon and they would be going to England. But to him it felt longer, at least a day.

Shaking his head, Harry dispelled his memories of the centaur drug trip. He didn't want to recall the majority of it just then, if ever, and hoped an awful lot that the little man, Beelzebub, was gone from his head.

Not surprised in the least, Harry found Ron enjoying a late breakfast/early lunch right where he had left him so much time ago. In the few days after utilising this house Harry had stocked it well with food and supplies from the Muggle world. Ron seemed to have a deep fixation for Coca Cola, as the table was littered with empty cans of the sugary drink.

"You do know that that stuff rots your teeth," Harry whispered. He had appeared silently behind Ron and smirked as his best friend jumped in his chair and flicked his wrist, propelling his wand into his hand.

"Very funny," Ron grunted, sitting back down and returning to his plate of

Poptarts and Smarties. "You do what you had to do?"

"Always," Harry nodded, swiping one of the cokes and pulling the tab. "I did more than I thought I would, too."

Harry gazed at Ron hard, staring straight into his eyes. Ron shifted in his seat under his gaze but didn't say anything. It had been one hell of a revelation at the end of the magic powder visions. One hand, perhaps of the Creator, but a hand held five fingers. Now that he had realised that, Harry thought

Ron should look different, perhaps stronger, but there was no change in his friend.

He was human – they all were – but for some reason it was Harry who had been given all the strength and power. He was the Darkslayer, which was the Hand of God, so did that mean Ron, Hermione and Ginny, Ethan as well, were also, in part, the Darkslayer? Harry didn't think so. That was his curse, and his alone.

And then Hermione and Ginny came out of their respective rooms. The kitchen was fitted against the far wall in a large, somewhat empty room that was extremely big and open. The guest rooms were fitted against one of the side walls, and in between all of that was the comfortable sitting room. Light poured into the magically expanded room from the long, clear glass window that was also the front wall.

What do I tell them...? Harry wondered, feeling nothing much one way or the other. To tell the truth he was fed up with all these cryptic prophecies and half glimpsed futures shrouded in uncertain secrets. It had gone on too long and he didn't want to dance to the tune of it anymore. Getting out was impossible though – when you had to be in it to win it.

"I thought I heard you," Ginny smiled warmly. "What happened to your cheek? And your shoulder! Did you even notice the gash in it!?"

Harry blinked and then remembered the injuries he had suffered in the... dream world... Ralph the houseplant had stabbed him and an enemy

soldier had grazed his shoulder with a sizzling hot bullet. There was also a gash in his lower leg as well. He waved his hand in a few complex movements and all the cuts and grazes across his body knitted themselves back together.

“I forgot, Ginny,” he shrugged. “But... but just come and sit down. I’ve something to tell you that you could consider important. I don’t think it is that important, but then I am tired of this game... very tired... it might shock you, however.”

“What is it?” Hermione asked, glancing nervously at Ginny. “Is Ginny—?”

“Not just Ginny,” Harry said carefully, gesturing to the empty seats at the kitchen table. “All of you.”

Hermione sat down silently next to Ron, who wiped his mouth of pop-tart residue and raised an eyebrow in Harry’s direction. Ginny seemed to sense the seriousness of the situation and calmly took a seat opposite Harry, who stood leaning against the kitchen cabinets.

So Harry told them their fate. In the simplest terms that he could. They were destined, it seemed, to suffer the wars of evil. He spoke about the memories he had that could confirm the five-finger theory he knew to be true. He mentioned Ethan, and his belief that the man had been in his head for so long because, just like them, he had a vital role to play in what was to come.

Harry knew how each of his friends would react, and he wasn’t surprised in the least that Ron, Hermione and Ginny accepted what he said without hesitations. There was no fear, only a steely determination. That said, Ron’s appetite did seem to dwindle somewhat and he pushed his plate of junk food away.

“The five of us,” Harry said, after giving them time to digest this latest development. “We five are all that stand between Creation and Annihilation. Opposites again there – it’s all connected, it always been.

Everything that we have ever done or will ever do, that anyone has ever done, has been leading up to our final fight....”

“This is... *big*,” Ron decided.

“I don’t want to be overly dramatic,” Harry continued. “We’re all part of this story and we can try and stop it becoming too cliché, but I do have to say this... we are the Hand of God, each of us an avatar of the Creator... Beyond that I don’t know what it means, or even if it matters, but it is true. Somewhere along the line our story split from the insane and became the absurd... we just have to live with that, whatever the cost....”

Harry took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. “Countless worlds exist just out of sight, within choice and chance... imagination is looking into another possible world. Stories are what make a universe – anyone that has ever written ‘fiction’ has created another world that we can reach, through magic. I’m saying this because I want you to understand the scope, the awesome size of Existence, and know how much will be lost should we fail.”

“We won’t fail,” Ginny said fiercely. “We can’t fail.”

Hermione shuddered. “I wish I shared your conviction, Gin,” she whispered. “We’ll give it our best, Harry.”

Ron, surprising them all, began to laugh – to chuckle even. “Why not?” he said. “You’re running out of coke, by the way, Harry.”

Harry grinned. It was both calm and insane. “Well you know now,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “You know who you are and you know where we’re going. I want you to make all your future choices knowing full well the consequences should it all go to hell. And now that all that crap is out of the way, get your coats, we’re going home.”

Ron and Hermione moved off towards their rooms, to do just what Harry had asked, but Ginny stayed. She eyed Harry for a moment, and he stared out of the far window, probably millions of miles away searching

for a way out of this mess.

“What’s next, Harry?” she asked him. “Where do we go from here, Mr. Twilight?”

Harry blinked when she called him that. Beelzebub had done the same. It brought a smile to his face. “What’s next, she asks,” he whispered. “Well, Gin, my army is next. The Twilight Guardians are next... this world, is next.”

The Twilight Guardians were something Harry had been giving a lot of thought to. He needed to expand their numbers beyond thirty, and add some wizarding folk into their ranks, too, but the list of people he could trust wasn’t exactly a mile long. One thing Harry had to make certain was that the Guardians were deeply entrenched in the Light. He couldn’t have dark wizards in their number.

There could be no betrayal at a critical moment, nothing to disrupt his all too shaky plans. He could take no prisoners; he could show no mercy – anyone that stood against him, who was evil, would die. It wasn’t easy looking at everything in black and white, but the many shades of grey no longer had any place in this world.

Everyone had to choose a side.

Damned if you do damned if you don’t.

Oh, heck.

Maggie Thorn would look after things in his Australian Ministry for a few days, perhaps even a week if he needed it. She had come to see the need for him, after having dozens of her Aurors slaughtered in the foyer of the Ministry by only five, albeit super-charged, Death Eaters.

Harry’s bandana slipped down and he absently pushed it back up under his fringe, all the while thinking and thinking, the thoughts turning and turning – searching for the one answer that could solve all of his

problems and that most likely did not exist.

At times, Harry wondered if the last hundred years had been just a vivid nightmare, and that at any moment now he would wake up, back at Privet

Drive in the summer before his sixth year at Hogwarts. *That* was a dream, wishful thinking, something he could not allow himself to be distracted by.

There were and would be too many battles in the future, and just thinking about the coming months gave Harry a headache. So far this week leading up to his birthday had been as hectic as most in his life, and it wasn't over yet. Voldemort stood at the head of it all, always Voldemort.

Harry had no doubt that, given the chance, Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord, could bend the mighty Destroyer army to his will. He was that powerful. Harry knew he could do it, because Harry knew that he himself could do it. He had destroyed them once and would do so again, and at the same time deliver a serious blow against Voldemort.

Best laid plans, however....

"All set," Ron said, his arm around Hermione's waist as they came back over to the kitchen. Despite all they had learnt over the last few weeks, Harry was certain his friends were as strong as he had to be when it came to dicing with fate and the powers that sought control of Creation. They had handled it well, and would continue to do so.

Harry nodded, shoving the sleeves of his robes back and exposing his arms. "Grab an arm," he said to Ginny and then offered his other to Ron and Hermione. "Grimmauld Place first up, I reckon. Then I need to set some plans in motion."

The Prime Minister stared with tired eyes out of his window at Number 10, Downing Street. The last few weeks had been his hardest since

taking office, most likely the hardest any Prime Minister had had to face in this office. Save perhaps the great Winston Churchill, who led the world to war and saved civilisation so many years ago.

Sighing, the Prime Minister returned to his desk and looked at the growing pile of deaths reported in the newspapers and the odd occurrences happening all across the planet. No names were mentioned of the perpetrators of some really terrible crimes, as the perpetrators hadn't even been seen let alone caught. It stunk of the magical world, however, it could be nothing else.

The mass grave robberies had been another headache. In Britain alone fifteen thousand – *15,000!* – corpses had simply vanished. Overseas the number was higher. The Minister for Magic Arthur Weasley had informed him, after being pushed to it, that Voldemort had reanimated the corpses and swelled his armies.

The Prime Minister shuddered. Such a thing was unbelievable; unacceptable... he was powerless to stop it. Inferi, Minister Weasley had called them, and not for the first time the Prime Minister was afraid of this magical war.

He had heard nothing from Harry Potter in over a fortnight and that in itself was worrying. Apparently the boy had secured the magical Ministry in Australia, and the Ministry of his own island was now supporting him, but that still left the rest of the world... and it was a big world.

The Prime Minister wondered how long it would be before he could spend some quality time with his family again. The job had been keeping him busy working twenty hour days for too long now, and he was close to snapping. The public were screaming for the government to protect them from the terrorists that had disturbed their idyllic world....

But these madmen had powers the majority of the nation didn't, and the attacks were getting more and more frequent. Dementors – he really wished he had never heard of those monsters – were leaving dozens of people as soulless husks every week. Everything was spiralling out of

control.

“Hello, Prime Minister,” a dark voice whispered.

Jerking his head up, the Prime Minister had not heard the man enter his office, and only had to take one look at the intruder to know why. A tall man in long flowing black robes stood before him. His hair was dark and cut close on his head and his eyes seemed haunted, shrunken back into his skull... and they shone faintly with a red light.

“Who are you?” the Prime Minister growled. “Did Weasley send you?” The man laughed and his eyes flashed. The Prime Minister blinked and the man held his magical wand firmly in his hand.

“No, my master is not your master, muggle,” the man laughed. “Though there can be no harm in knowing my name... I am Rodolphus Lestrangle.”

The Prime Minister rose and took a deep breath, exhaling sharply. “What can I do for you, Mr. Lestrangle?”

Lestrangle laughed and his eyes burnt with Voldemort’s power. “You can die, fool,” he laughed. “*Avada Kedavra!*”

The Prime Minister slumped over his desk, dead, before he could blink. Removing a vial of ugly looking potion from his robes, Lestrangle moved over to the corpse and cut off all of the man’s hair with a cutting charm, placing it into a box and dropping a strand into the Polyjuice.

He disposed of the body with a portkey, sending the man to his master where he would become a mindless zombie, joining the Dark Lord’s legion of Inferi. He then swallowed the potion with a grimace and took his seat, scowling at his despicable reflection in a mirror on the wall before transfiguring his robes into muggle attire.

Rodolphus Lestrangle had just become the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

Fred and George Weasley had owned and operated their own store in Diagon Alley for about a year, give or take a few months, and business was booming. Apparently the darker the war got the more people wanted cheering up, so the two Weasley twins were hard pressed to keep up with demand.

As such, they had rebuilt their Hogsmeade branch after the village was annihilated last March, and taken on more staff in a production facility buried beneath that store. Diagon Alley was still their main branch, and they were making galleons faster than they could spend them.

Harry had been told all of this by Ron after he had dropped his friends off at Grimmauld Place. It had been a relieving, tearful for some, reunion between Ron and Ginny and Mrs. Weasley. Harry had not stayed long, trusting his friends to do all the explaining that was necessary.

He found himself in Diagon Alley now, having made a quick trip back to his base in Australia to grab a few things he didn't want his friends knowing about yet. They had not explored his large house in its entirety, and the War Room – in which Harry had briefed the Twilight Guardians before leading them into battle – was sealed because of the dangerous equipment inside. It hid his armoury, which was protected by so many wards and spells that the metal cages were scorchingly hot to the touch.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny had charged some clear magical crystals for him, but not enough and not many – they simply didn't have the strength to mass produce them. Harry did, but it took time, and he knew that later on today he'd have to go see Dumbledore about the crystals they had spoken about a few days ago. He needed those crystals.

The armoury in the War Room also held the rolls of parchment upon which he had written down all the knowledge he could recall from the Ways of Twilight. He carried a few of those scrolls now, in a small pocket-sized trunk, along with a few dozen packets of charged crystals.

The glowing crystals were extremely explosive in their current, almost raw, form. Harry carried enough of them in his pocket to turn London and most of the south eastern land mass of Britain into a new ocean. The thought made him grin and just once he questioned whether it was wise to give such power to the Weasley twins.

Bending light around himself so that he was invisible to all, Harry entered the bright and ever vibrant shop, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. It wasn't that busy at this early hour. It had only just turned eight o'clock, and Harry caught a glimpse of either Fred or George entering the supply room through the back.

He walked across the store and followed him, sealing the door behind him as he entered the darkened store room.

"We need to increase production, Fred, on the fireworks, swamps, toffees, and hats," George said, handing his brother a scroll of parchment. "We're selling them faster than we can make them."

Fred nodded, running his hand back through his red hair. "Hire more staff at the factory then, it seems."

"Or we could sell the designs to Zonko, and have him make them for us," George mused. "There wouldn't be that big of a loss in profit, and it would increase the product range."

Fred shrugged his shoulders. "We'll see what—AH!"

Harry dropped his cloak of light with a thought and appeared leaning against a stack of crates, running a galleon across the back of his knuckles. He smiled as both George and Fred reached for their wands, assuming a duelling stance, before recognising him.

"Hi, guys," Harry nodded. "Long time no see."

"Harry," Fred exclaimed, slipping his wand out of sight. "How spiffing to

see you, mate. Are we to understand you have brought our dear brother and sister back with you?"

"They're over at Grimmauld Place calming your mother down before I head over there. I'd face Voldemort's wrath over Molly's any day."

George nodded sagely. "As would anyone with half a brain. Anyway, Harry, to what do we owe the pleasure?"

"If we knew," Fred continued, "that the world's most wanted criminal was going to waltz into our humble shop today, we would have provided tea and biscuits and brushed our hair."

Harry grinned. "I'm sorry I didn't make an appointment, but I've been keeping a low profile of late."

"Low profile!?" the twins exclaimed as one.

"Harry," George laughed. "You fought a storm demon in the skies above London for the whole world to see!"

"You declared war on the International Confederation," Fred smiled.

"You're Minister for Magic in Australia, you fool," George grinned and then walked over to slap Harry on the back. "What can we do for you, Minister?"

"Or have you just dropped in to say hi?"

Harry shook his head and removed his shrunken trunk from his pocket. He expanded it on the floor and then flipped the lid open, revealing the glowing racks and sealed power crystals, along with the dozens of scrolls of parchment, packed tight with his small untidy scrawl. He picked up the first scroll and unfurled it.

"This," he said, noting the eager glint in the eyes of the Weasley twins. They at least had some idea of what the crystals were. "This is a plan for

a shield device, using a mix of muggle and magical technology that doesn't exist yet."

"Shield device?"

Harry nodded. "Powerful enough to block any type of dark magic when fitted with three of those crystals there. It is also big enough to surround Hogwarts, including the forest, and this is just the small model."

"Technology that doesn't exist yet?" said George.

"That's right," Harry replied. "Because you two are going to invent it."

"We are?" the two twins chorused.

"You are."

Fred and George exchanged one of those glances that only twins can, in which an entire conversation and agreement was made silently. They nodded to each other and then took the plans for the shield from Harry.

"When do you need this by?"

"As soon as possible." Harry inclined his head in thanks. "I don't just need that one. There are dozens of other... *devices* that I want you two to build for me. All of them are detailed in these scrolls and all of them need these power crystals to make them work to their maximum potential."

Fred and George nodded. "And how much of each unit do you need?"

"Hundreds, guys, hundreds."

They took it in their stride. "No worries. And while we're at it, why don't we go tackle Voldemort and let you have the day off. Least we can do for saddling us with such an impossible task."

“Two and a half million galleons will be transferred into your vault by lunch time today,” Harry said. “To build as many of everything in this trunk as you can, in the time we’ve got, we’ll probably take about five hundred thousand of those galleons. Two million for your trouble and to pay any workers you need to hire to build this stuff.”

“Staff...?” George wondered aloud. “I thought you chose us to do this, Harry, because you wanted it kept a secret.”

“Those plans are useless without a power crystal personally charged by me, at least one in each device. And I chose you two because you have a knack for creating the absurd.” Harry laughed and the age old madness flashed in his eyes. “Some of the things in these plans go beyond even absurd.”

Fred reached down into the trunk and selected a scroll of parchment at random. He could feel the heat and power radiating off of the crystals in waves. They would be searing hot to the touch, so specialist equipment was going to be needed for this. Fred undid the clasp on the scroll and glanced at this... this....

“Harry,” Fred said slowly, carefully, and for once with an utter and complete seriousness. “Is this what I think it is?”

Harry raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “I dunno? What’ve I called it?”

Fred shook his head. “You’ve just scribbled ‘LAST RESORT’ at the top of the page and underlined it six times.”

Harry grinned again and George shuddered as he took the plans from his brother. “Ah... that,” Harry said. “That, my friends, is... well, I suppose you could call it a bomb.”

“A bomb,” Fred whispered. “If those calculations and magical-yield estimates were correct, Harry, then that is more than just a bomb.”

Harry nodded. "The Final Bomb," he whispered. "An ace up my sleeve... if this world is going to hell it's going there my way, on my terms."

George swallowed and carefully put the scroll down on the floor before him, as if afraid that it would explode. "Well that would certainly do the trick," he managed. "Harry, don't take this the wrong way... but are you bloody insane?"

"That parchment shouldn't exist," Fred hissed. "We should burn it right now. Do you know what you're asking us to make!?"

Harry had to admire the blazing set of morals that had been instilled in the entire Weasley family. As it stood now, Harry wouldn't hesitate to detonate such a device if it would end the war, but the cost of doing so would be astronomical. Here, the Weasley twins did not even want to know it could exist. They were right, of course, it shouldn't....

In a perfect world it wouldn't, but no world is perfect.

"I'm asking you to make... a future," Harry said, his voice calm yet hard. "All of the devices in this trunk are going to be used to end a war, free the world, stop the fighting... and save lives...."

George shook his head, glaring down at the parchment at his feet. "This... this *thing*, Harry, won't save lives. It has only one use, and it is beyond stupid to make it."

"If it comes to it," Harry growled. "I will need this bomb to stop Voldemort leaving this planet."

"Leave it!?" Fred exclaimed. "Where could he possibly go?"

Harry closed his eyes and hung his head down. "We live side by side with a thousand million other worlds, and Voldemort is strong enough and will live long enough to destroy them all, should he attempt it. One world, our world, is a small price to pay to end it here."

May you be damned, once again, for it, Ethan chuckled.

“How could a weapon like this possibly work anyway?” Fred asked, throwing up his hands. “There can’t be enough power to....”

Harry grinned that maddening grin once again. “How much power, Fred, do you think is inside of a human being? How much raw energy?”

Glancing once again down at the plans, and then at each other, both Fred and George paled as they realised the final, ultimate implications of Harry’s Final Bomb.

“We will *not*,” they spat. “We will *never* make that! It shouldn’t be possible, Harry, it shouldn’t—”

“What?” Harry shrugged, still smiling calmly. “My bomb here connects the life forces of every single human being on this planet together, joins them all across the face of the earth, and then....”

“BOOM!” Fred exclaimed.

“Boom,” Harry agreed. “One helluva boom, boys. Every single atom in every single human being on this planet, coupled with those who possess raw magical energy, exploding, splitting, erupting all in the blink of an eye. It would be quite painless and humane compared to a world under Voldemort’s rule.”

Fred and George had paled and they fell back until they were leaning against the crates of supplies and merchandise. “This is unbelievable,” George whispered. “You’re supposed to be the good guy, Harry.” It was clear from the look in his eyes that he would never have any part in creating the bomb.

“The hero,” Fred muttered. “That’s who you’re supposed to be.”

Harry thought about that for a long moment, staring into the faint light of his power crystals, sealed as they were in the trunk. “The hero....” he

finally said. "No, Fred, I'm no hero. I'm just a guy who gets the job done. You two are heroes, I reckon, for standing by your morals and refusing to build this monstrosity." He gestured to the plans for the bomb. "I'm sorry I asked you to. Trust me when I say there is nothing this horrific in the other plans, but I'll understand if you don't want to make some of it."

He summoned the Final Bomb parchment and tucked it into his pocket. Fred and George wouldn't build it, so Harry would have to find the time to himself. It had to be built, as he saw it, but with any luck never used. The truly terrifying thing of it was, that once it was built it would fit comfortably into the palm of his hand.

Harry was about to say more but he suddenly felt a great pulling in his stomach, a pulling that had only ever meant one thing. Darkness, trouble, great power. He shuddered for a moment as the possibility briefly occurred to him that the Destroyers could have just broken through. *No*, he thought, *it is too early... they can't have yet.*

Also, his senses were attuned to the Darkslayer pull in his stomach, and he knew that this evil was close by. Out in Diagon Alley. Harry sighed and closed the trunk at his feet.

"Don't suppose you fellas were expecting a Death Eater attack today," he said.

Fred chuckled. "No, why do you ask?"

From beyond the walls of the shop came the screams, the familiar screams, and then the sounds of curse fire and muffled explosions. Harry disappeared, leaving Fred and George, and reappeared outside of their shop in the early morning sunlight of Diagon Alley.

A thick sparkling stream of dark green light threatened to wash his life away as soon as he appeared. Time seemed to slow and Harry took a smooth step to his left across the cobblestones, the killing curse cutting passed his left ear and freezing the air. Harry never flinched in the face of death, and now was no exception.

In the time he had spent with Fred and George, the number of patrons in the alley, the wizards and witches, must have tripled. Dozens of scared and terrified individuals were running by either side of him, tripping over each other and jostling the crowd in their haste to escape the advancing line of Death Eaters.

Fifty at least, burning and pillaging their way up Diagon Alley. Green flames and billowing plumes of smoke rose up from the destruction behind them, and on the wind Harry caught the all too familiar smell of burning flesh. A searing hot parcel of air rushed into his back and Harry turned, his eyes widening momentarily as he caught sight of the mounted Death Eaters.

The Dragon Riders.

Four of them, circling and diving in the skies above London and Diagon Alley. Every few moments one of the Death Eaters would pull their leashed monster down and the dragon would shoot liquid hot flames onto the dry rooftops in the alley and surrounding Muggle establishments.

Like they had done a thousand times before, Harry's palms flared and white power roared up his arms, encasing them and burning away the sleeves of his shirt and robes. His skin tingled, as usual, and was left unburnt. He began to burn away and intercept the curses, dodging and letting go the killing curse he couldn't do anything about.

He sent two dozen curses, explosion hexes and blasting jinxes for the most part, deflecting up into the sky towards the large bulk of the nearest dragon. His skin thick and magically reinforced, all the spells managed to do was knock the beast momentarily off course.

Harry began to slaughter the Death Eaters.

Light flared in his fingertips and silver arrows burst from that light, ripping through the air and then ripping through the Death Eaters. At their

velocity, the arrows rocked the alley at just short of the speed of sound. Fifteen Death Eaters died from the first five of Harry's arrows.

Long since immune to the death he caused, Harry thrust his hands together and began to pool his magic into a ball of sparkling light, all the while never taking his eyes from the rain of curses and deflecting those he could with his thoughts. When necessary, he sidestepped the dark green light of the

Avada Kedavra. The pressure between his palms grew to an extraordinary level, and the strain of it broke out in the form of sweat on his forehead, which was kept out of his eyes by the bandana he had taken to wearing.

"Boom," he whispered, releasing the sphere of power and closing his eyes, searching for any feeling or emotion to affect him now. There was nothing.

It grew laterally at first, until it reached the store fronts on either side of the alley, and then it burst forward in a stream of the purest light that annihilated any flesh that was caught in its awesome radiance. The Death Eaters shadows appeared against the light and they were scorched into the pavement.

The remaining three dozen Death Eaters simply disintegrated. They ceased to exist this side of death.

Harry turned his attention skywards and to the flying menaces above him. He cursed and raised his hand above his head as one of the massive monsters landed on the rooftops above him and breathed down its liquid fire. As the flames fell, a dome shield rose above Harry and deflected the heat either side of him. He was encased in a dome of the hottest flames for a full minute before the dragon finally let up.

In that time, two of the other beasts had landed on the rooftops of Diagon Alley and the final dragon was circling overhead still. The three on the rooftops seemed to be staring into his eyes, seeking him out as the biggest and only threat amongst the scurrying humans beneath them.

The dragons roared as one, not releasing their fires but breath hot enough to scorch Harry's skin. He stood his ground, surrounded in a personal shield, and called his twin swords into existence, crossing his arms over his chest. With a single slash of these blades he could level London.

Wield your swords with full knowledge of the consequences, Ethan said, and his laughter echoed across and through Harry's mind. *Be very, very careful... There's no mercy in those blades, Harry, just your intent. Death will not make such a distinction....*

Harry chuckled. "The Reaper is always one step behind me...."

He raised his swords above his head and they shone in the sun. From the cloudless sky forks of powerful, deadly and colourful lightning tore towards the earth and the tips of Harry's weapons. Harry himself fell to one knee when they struck, spiralling around his long swords and crackling across his hilt. Once again his palms burnt from the effort.

The twin swords of Godric Gryffindor, of the Guardian, shone red and blue, green and silver, white and black.... A metallic taste entered the air as

Harry rose and spun on the spot. Reality vibrated around him and threatened to collapse under the weight of his strength – but it held, for now.

Harry pointed the glowing tip of his sword towards the nearest dragon crushing the buildings on his far left and released the power, whilst pointing his other sword at the opposite dragon. A beam of the purest, darkest and cruellest magic shot from the swords like twin cannons.

It simply obliterated the dragons, destroying their heads in an explosion of flesh, blood and bone. Dragon skin could not stand against a power as old, if not older, than eternity and Fate herself.

Harry swung his arms around as the other dragon took flight, but nothing

in this world could now save it. Harry's beams cut through its retreating body, which became nothing more than a falling mass of dead flesh that struck the rooftops over London a moment later. The final dragon was already racing for the horizon, and Harry let it go.

"Blimey, Harry," Fred or George Weasley said a moment later, as Harry released the power and put his swords away.

Uninjured, but very tired, Harry watched the first two dragons he had 'beheaded'. He watched their bodies fall across the alley and crush storefronts.

A part of him realised then that it might not be worth rebuilding Diagon Alley, for this was still only the beginning.

"I'll send more crystals in a week," Harry muttered, his eyes always alert for danger. He scanned the sky now. "I need those devices built fast, Fred, George... I'm sorry."

A wave of the fabric of reality washed over Harry and he was gone.

Harry apparated across the face of the planet and reappeared, as planned, in a lower level of this reality. He was invisible deeper into the canvas than the surface world, but not so deep that everything was missing. Only a few colours were not yet painted onto the world at this level – everything else was there.

He had apparated into the heart of the Australian continent, and to the facility he had had his Ministry construct and build over the last few weeks. Across the desert to the horizon dozens of straight and magically enchanted barracks stretched and shimmered in the hot desert sun.

There was a town of sorts growing in the centre of the army barracks, with food stores and entertainment for the soldiers. Each long white shed was more comfortable on the inside than it looked on the outside.

Private rooms for the officers and long shared rooms for the regular soldiers, but sporting all the usual comforts such as bathrooms, kitchens, and even games rooms.

He didn't want his soldiers forgetting what they were fighting for.

A surprising number had turned up after he announced his proclamation to the world – and so far only to the magical world. He believed the number of recruits being trained to fight by the Muggle soldiers, the Twilight Guardians, and being trained to duel by Australia's Aurors, was somewhere between 7000 and 10000, with that number rising everyday as more and more wizards and witches from the international community signed up.

There was enough space here to house millions upon millions of people, and even without wards and charms they would probably never be seen or found deep within the outback as they were. Still, Harry intended to place a few safety measures around the visible facility before he left – just until

Fred and George completed a few of the defensive devices he had signed them on for.

He began constructing the wards in his mind, painting them onto the reality canvas he stood in. It didn't take long and he tied their strength into his magical core. No one could break these wards, save Voldemort, and it would take even him some time.

The majority of the white barrack houses were empty, awaiting other soldiers, and if Harry had to guess – he knew the Ministry was still constructing even more barracks – he would say the camp currently held maybe 5% of its maximum capacity.

He Apparated to the main operations centre within the complex and stepped into the first layer of reality. The man he had left in charge, the Muggle whose name was a secret and known only as Alpha One, showed no surprise when Harry appeared out of thin air before him. As if he had been expecting it, he saluted his superior.

“Commander Potter,” Alpha One said.

Harry inclined his head. “At ease, soldier,” he said. His voice was tinged with the sound of experience. And why not? He had led enough armies to war over the years to know how to run one. Even when he had just been a soldier in some, or a commander in others, he had learnt how to do the job.

“We’ve been expecting you for some time, sir,” Alpha One said. He was unshaven and dark rings surrounded his eyes. Even in this slightly cooled complex the desert heat was making the Englishman sweat and his brown locks seemed glued to his forehead.

Harry looked around the room at the desks and chairs, the maps on the walls and spread haphazardly across the tables. Light shone in through the windows and half a dozen people were always coming and going. Trained as they were, not a one spared a second glance towards Harry and Alpha One.

“I would like a progress report,” Harry said, taking a seat and conjuring two glasses of ice cold water. He offered one to Alpha One, who accepted it gratefully.

“We’re on schedule to the conditions set, sir,” Alpha One said, and drained his glass of water. “There have been a few deserters, I’m sorry to say, but those arriving more than offset the loss.”

“What are the numbers?” Harry asked. Harry noticed that the man, even though he wasn’t dressed for battle or probably even expecting a fight, concealed a weapon – modified pistol – around his ankle and one under the arm of his jacket. It was the mark of a good soldier.

Not even needing to consult a list of figures, Alpha One said, “Eight thousand, nine hundred and forty seven soldiers are currently housed here at Twilight One, Commander. Four hundred and twelve officers live and

sleep in their facilities here, too.”

“The training? You’ve trained four hundred officers already?”

Alpha One nodded. “Not to the greatest standard, sir,” he said. “But the soldiers need discipline and to see a chain of command established. The Twilight Guardians have personally undertaken the task of training the officers in accelerated courses. We started with a thousand recruits, and the remaining four hundred and twelve have what it takes.”

Harry agreed with that – it was the right thing to do. “And the soldiers’ training? How are the instructors managing with so many students?”

Alpha One shook his head. “Slow but steady,” he told Harry. “We haven’t enough weapons to outfit each and every soldier, so most days they’re on rotation at the firing ranges whilst the majority of candidates are taught basic survival tactics in the bush, and duelling skills by the Ministry Aurors.”

Harry rubbed the bridge of his nose as he nodded. He could feel another headache coming on and wondered if it was a side effect of the centaur drugs. His leg had begun to ache as well, from an old injury, and just thinking about that caused his shoulder to flare up too. He didn’t sigh, however, a leader could not indulge in such weaknesses.

The weapons were a major problem, he knew, and one that needed to be solved fast.

“How many guns do you have in the armoury here?” he asked. “There are fifty rifles back at the manor... and several dozen more waiting to be modified. I’m expecting a shipment from your Prime Minister soon.”

“At the moment, sir,” Alpha One breathed a long sigh. “We can equip one hundred and twenty seven of the recruits with full battle gear and weaponry. They have their... magical wands... but the rifles are the preferred weapon in this war. More devastating, faster, and guaranteed kills.”

Yeah, with today's weaponry there's no longer any need for medics in the field, Ethan scoffed.

"Within two weeks...." Harry began slowly, weighing up his options against his allies and enemies. "Within two weeks, Alpha One, I can deliver one thousand modified rifles. How long after that before I could send a unit into battle?"

Alpha One shrugged. "I'd ask for three months," he said. "But with the timeframe you outlined I know that's not possible... who would they be fighting?"

"Not who," Harry said, "what. I need a fair few hundred soldiers to tackle a growing problem on United Kingdom soil. They'd be fighting the dead – living corpses. Mindless zombies that would only put up a fight because of their sheer numbers. Inferi, they are called. I intend to have the army slaughter them."

Alpha One paled at hearing of the enemy, but that was the only sign of his discomfort he allowed to show. "Six weeks from today, and you can confidently take five hundred men out of here," he said. "That is, if the weapons are delivered within a fortnight."

Harry nodded. "They will be. What's the state of the supplies?"

Alpha One waved his hand towards the large piles of documents and loose sheets of paper littering the office. "We are really only short of weapons," he said. "But seeing as how this army is in violation of several dozen treaties – both Muggle and Magical, apparently – our food supplies and basic building and living supplies have been coming from Australia only, and as of a few days ago the magical government of Britain. We're stretched, but managing."

Too many potential allies were stacked against him, Harry knew. He needed to assume command of the other magical nations soon or risk being wiped out before his campaign even truly began. His army was the

largest in the world, if Voldemort's legions of dark creatures were not counted, and that had to worry the IC.

His greatest political opposition was the Americans, or more specifically Sorcerer John Rafter, whose motives were not clear. Harry didn't want to get involved with the politicians of the world, but he knew a lot of people were going to die for Rafter's refusal to submit. And while that may be admirable, none of them could ever understand the true threat and the strength of Harry's resolve.

"We're doing well," Harry eventually said and stood up. He had been here too long and still had a lot to do today. "You're doing well, Alpha One. Continue as planned and I'll see about the weapons."

"Commander," Alpha One said just as Harry was about to leave. "The troops here know that you are in charge, and yet none of them have ever even seen you. I would advise making a public announcement down in the square...."

Harry nodded and thought about that. It would take at least an hour to get the eight thousand recruits to the large empty square that was, in fact, just a desert plain. He didn't have that time.

"Not today," he said to Alpha One. "Soon, Captain, but not today."

It was late afternoon in Australia when Harry apparated into the Australian Ministry of Magic, into his Ministry, and headed straight for the Muggle

Information office. He was invisible, doing his bending the light trick, and soon came to the small office he knew was buried on the fourth floor behind the Improper Use of Magic Offices.

As it was late in the day, the sun slowly sinking beneath the horizon, very few people were left in the Ministry. But there were a few. Harry avoided these few easily enough and knew that they would never even know he

was there. Over the years he had perfected many abilities that allowed him to disappear even without the use of magic. Every step he took was silent and his breathing was too.

He didn't exist.

The door to the Muggle records office was, of course, locked, so Harry apparated through the wards and quickly began his search of the alphabetical stacks of information relating to the muggle world. It did not take him long to find what he was looking for. A detailed description of the muggle army bases dotted around the country.

The first place he recognised was one in Western Australia that was fairly close to the city of Perth, which was still being sifted for the dead and dying after the attack the other day. Harry actually struggled to remember what had happened there, as it was just another tragedy on the long list in his mind. It came to him, however, and he sighed. The tallest buildings in the city had been toppled.

But still, it would be beyond easy to jump to this military base now he had a location and even a small picture of it in the wizarding file. There would be a weapon storage facility there. Harry grinned as he flipped the page of the file in his hands to reveal a detailed map of the complex built just outside of Perth.

Swanbourne Barracks.

The Australian Ministry had obviously done its reconnaissance in the defensive capabilities of its muggle counterpart. On the map in his hands was a clear label of the armoury, and that was all he needed to see. Still invisible, Harry replaced the file and then apparated once again across the country, a few thousand miles, and into the armoury he had just seen on the map.

It was a lightless room but equipped with a state of the art security system. Harry knew he would have to be quick in... acquiring what he needed. The large underground warehouse he stood in was piled high

with muggle weapons, the most useful being the large crates along the far wall filled with Steyr-Aug rifles, the rifle of choice for the Australian armed forces.

Trying very hard not to feel like a kid in a candy store, and only take what he needed, Harry *jumped* over – took a single step across the warehouse and appeared next to the rifles. He was getting quite adept at quirkling with reality. The rifles were conveniently stacked together, so Harry cast a sealing and binding charm on all the crates and then, working fast, created a gateway into his manor house.

As long as the warehouse and forty feet high, Harry looked through into the ballroom of the house on the coast of Australia. It was largely empty, as Harry remembered, and had been doing nothing but gathering dust for decades. Harry picked up the bound crates of weapons with a levitation charm and began to move the bulky metal object through.

The alarm went off then, but Harry expected it to. Lights flashed on overhead and large metal grates began to slide down over the walls of the room, designed to seal in any thieves.

Harry ignored it all as he moved the three thousand rifles through the gateway and deposited them in the centre of the ballroom. Following them through, he closed the gateway and the sirens of the alarm were instantly cut off. He unbound the stacks of guns and knew he had at least one more stop today.

He had to go see Dumbledore and Mr. Weasley about getting some spellworkers to come here and charge crystals and to modify the muggle guns.

Amongst other things, that was. Merlin, but there was a lot to do.

Harry allowed himself a five minute break and made himself a quick snack in the kitchen before setting back out.

In a deep pit, infinitely long and wide, within the Boundary's darkest and desolate reach, hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of demons writhed and squirmed in their eternal prison. Freed only once against the Darkslayer, the demons had savoured their brief freedom only for the shortest of times – one hundred mortal years – before the Darkslayer had changed history and sealed them away again.

Converging on the Pit were millions of Destroyers, who had defeated the Guardians of this quadrant of the Boundary and now had the demons in their grasp and, very soon, their control.

The Destroyer army was a collective, of sorts, and each creature was part of a whole, and that whole had sworn their allegiance to the Dark Lord Voldemort, who was as strong as the Darkslayer and even lived on the same world that the Darkslayer had disappeared to after altering the history of Existence.

The demons would be delivered to the front lines of the Boundary, within reach of Voldemort's home world, and they would be the first wave of many to descend upon the Darkslayer.

War the likes of which even the infamous Harry Potter had never suffered through before would surge against that world, under Voldemort's command, and the oceans would turn crimson with the blood of the defiant human race.

[Chapter 20 - Old Enemies, New Allies](#)

*Liberty has never come from the government.
Liberty has always come from the subjects of it.
The history of liberty is a history of resistance.*

~~Woodrow Wilson

THE DAILY PROPHET

POTTER DISAPPEARS AGAIN!

Australian Minister for Magic Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived - wanted for international war crimes and unlawfully threatening the International Confederation - has vanished once more.

Potter disappeared in March and was presumed dead by the wizarding public only a month later, but he returned. And now, after rumours of an attack which left dozens of Australian ministry Aurors and personnel dead three days ago, Potter has not been seen since.

International backlash over the Ministry's decision to support young Potter in his bid for power still stings the nation a week later, and friendships with our allied nations have become shaky at best. The American Ministry has cut off short aid negotiations until such time as the United Kingdom declares Potter a threat to world peace once more. Minister Weasley did not comment on this issue.

Many fear that Potter has disappeared off the map because he intends to invade and assume control of another foreign ministry. As of last night, all magical nations around the world were on high alert for the boy wizard, who turns of age in two days time.

There are also those of the opinion that Potter has fled underground, himself fearing the international outrage he has caused and looking to disappear into the Muggle world.

But the last does not sound like the hero of the wizarding world we have come to know. Whilst Potter's motives and use of power may be borderline dark magic, no one can fault

him his strength or the fact that he is the strongest, perhaps only, real opposition against You Know Who.

With the line between the magical and muggle worlds fading almost everyday, there is a sense of great strain in the very air, of anticipation - a deep breath before the plunge. War is coming once again to Britain, to the world, and as we argue amongst ourselves in the International Confederation, the Dark Lord is single minded in his plans for domination.

Potter may be gone for now, but he will be back, and that knowledge is all the hope we can expect to have, and all the fear that He Who Must Not Be Named will ever know.

Harry sat alone on a barstool in the recently rebuilt Three Broomsticks, which was of course in the recently rebuilt wizarding town of Hogsmeade. He tossed the *Prophet* aside and quietly sipped a glass of amber Firewhiskey, the smoke from the drink burning in his nostrils. He was hidden within the darkness of his hood.

Perhaps sensing something of who he was, a man not to be trifled with, the other patrons in the bar had given him a wide berth of at least three seats to his left and right and a whole table behind him. Madam Rosmerta had positioned herself at the end of the bar about as far away as she could from him.

As always, Harry was alert for danger, but for the moment he knew there was nothing within a mile that could harm him. His old shoulder wound ached, however, and he had been walking with a limp for the last few hours. Over the last few days he had over exerted his scar-riddled left leg, and it was now painful to the touch. Harry ignored it.

That damn leg would be painful for the rest of his life....

Tipping back his head he swallowed the shot of whiskey and almost tapped the bar for another, but then decided against it. He wasn't as fast as he had been when... when... when he was young, and another shot would begin to impair his judgement. He wasn't certain, but if he was killed it would probably be a sore blow to the War for Creation, for the side of Light that is, but then it might also be the best thing for it. No

matter - Harry ignored those painful thoughts just like the physical pain in his leg.

His scar was another searing source of pain. One that was a little harder to ignore as it felt like Voldemort was driving ten inch nails into his skull. But the old curse link did tell him one thing. Voldemort was happy, content even. Something was going the Dark Lord's way, and beyond that Harry only had this feeling that Hogsmeade was in trouble. Voldemort's mind wasn't someplace he liked to see, but at times it was unavoidable.

Like half an hour ago at Grimmauld Place. The barriers of Occlumency both Harry and Voldemort kept firmly in place at all times had been overcome by the darker and infinitely stronger magic that linked the two of them. Harry had been sitting down to dinner with his friends after 'working' all day, and suddenly he knew - in the form of a nail through the skull - that Voldemort had plans for Hogsmeade.

So there he was in the Three Broomsticks, hooded and cloaked and listening to the muffled conversation and sounds of the bar around him. He caught snippets of talk and most of it was about him. Arguments over what he was doing and why - and more importantly *how* he was doing it.

"I'll tell ya something, Jez," a grizzled old wizard with a stubby chin and beefy cheeks growled. "I'll tell ya something. Potter's doing what should have been done years ago, during the First Dark War. He's building an army somewhere, that's what he's doing. Don't you believe the talk that he's running from the IC...."

"We know he's gathering an army, Toothie," Jez the short little wizard replied. "He put those notes up all over the planet, didn't he. Thinking of joining meself, actually. Fifty galleons a week is alright by me."

"Ah, you want no part of Potter's and You Know Who's war," an elderly witch with a long nose and sharp eyes said, pointing a finger at Toothie. "Naught but death is going to come from this, you hear me. A thousand people died out in the high street only four months ago. No, you listen you two, Potter and Lord... well; they can fight this out for themselves is what I say. Most likely the rest of us will end up paying anyway."

Ain't that the truth, Harry mused beneath his hood. *Ain't that always the truth....*

You don't deal in truth, Harry, Ethan said. *You deal in wars and universes.*

Harry smiled and stood up, dropping a few galleons onto the bar before heading for the door. Outside the night was cool but not cold and the heavens stretched on towards the horizon, a vast blanket of unchanged stars that had watched over this world and all of its problems since beyond memory.

The stars were one place Harry could never claim to have been, and that thought was oddly comforting.

Already disappearing in the eaves under the shadows, Harry rested his back against the wall of the pub and absently rubbed his sore leg. The silhouettes of houses and shops cut dark figures against the star strewn sky. There was no sign of any trouble, but then was there ever any sign?

Diagon Alley was still being rebuilt, even though Harry thought it pointless. Despite what he believed and what he wanted, Harry was fairly certain that he would lose Britain to Voldemort. Some concessions had to be made and it wasn't worth backing the Dark Lord into a corner. An enemy with nowhere to run will fight to the death - ferociously and mercilessly.

But still, he would not surrender his homeland without one hell of a fight.

Hogwarts castle shone over to his left above the canopy of trees in the Dark Forest. A few lights were on in the castle, including the one in Dumbledore's study. It was no longer home, Harry knew, but he wished it was.

He had seen Dumbledore yesterday for only the briefest of times. Ten minutes or so. He had gone to secure the crystals and spellworkers to build his weapons, and had not been disappointed. As it stood, thirty five wizards and witches were currently charging crystals for the modified rifles on the coast of Australia, in his workroom in the large manor house.

The plans were easy enough to follow so Harry was expecting an output

of at least one hundred rifles a day, perhaps more once the team of ministry spellworkers became adept at the designs. He had a growing number of soldiers to outfit with this weaponry - eight thousand - so every gun was a success. He did not have time himself to modify even a dozen weapons.

A lone wizard entered the Three Broomsticks, and for the shortest of moments as its door was open Harry's shadowy form was visible. He quickly corrected this by bending the light away from him in a small barrier, making himself all but invisible to the naked eye.

It had grown cold enough that he could see his breath on the air and he became pensive for a moment, thinking about how big everything was, and yet the laws of nature still had time to make his breath appear before him as the warm air condensed with the cold. Of all the things it could be doing it still did that. Harry shook his head, angry at himself for being distracted.

A moment later and Harry had fair warning of what was in store for him that night, and it came in the form of an eerie, unnatural calm that descended over Hogsmeade a second before the pain in his scar came to an abrupt stop.

A series of pops broke the calm and Harry calmly stepped from the shadows of the Three Broomsticks and into the shadows beneath the storefront of the darkened sweet shop, silently *jumping* across space in the flimsy stage most people call reality.

Every single light in Hogsmeade faded and died within the next heartbeat and Harry's insane smile deepened.

On the High Street, standing not even one hundred feet away, he could see tiny pinpricks of red light hanging in the air, and two blazing pinpricks of darker - crimson - light. A rush of cold washed over him and the dark of the night became absolute, as once again Harry beheld the Dark Lord Voldemort.

Flanked by at least five of his super charged Death Eaters, Voldemort had come to Hogsmeade tonight to undo the reconstruction, to stake his claim on this land by destroying all that lived upon it. Hogwarts itself was

on the to-do list that evening, but not if Harry had anything to say about it.

And Harry being Harry, he had a lot to say about it.

He stepped out, invisible, into the middle of the road - closing the gap to fifty feet between himself and his greatest adversary. Harry knew the moment he tapped into his power Voldemort would do the same, within split seconds of one another. If he could end the war right now by cursing the monster in the back he would without hesitation, but the power was too unpredictable for that. Allarius had blown up upon his defeat, and taken a universe with him.

Harry pulled his hood back to reveal his head, bandana firmly in place and cheeks rough, unshaven. Despite a slightly pale look and rings around his eyes, Harry simply was the image of power incarnate.

He blinked and every light, every torch in every lamppost, on the street flared to life a dozen times brighter than normal. For a moment daylight flared in Hogsmeade before the radiance dimmed.

"Hello, Voldemort," Harry smiled. "Of all the towns in all the world...."

It was the usual suspects. Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, Peter Pettigrew, and - Harry had to think hard to remember their names - Dolohov and Rabastan Lestrange. All of them had red eyes, reflecting the insanity of their master, and all of them raised their wands at Harry as soon as they saw him.

"AVA--" was on the lips of the five minions before Voldemort silenced them with a wave of his hand and inclined his head to Harry.

Despite the torches Harry had brought back to life, the light seemed to die around the Dark Lord - just fail and become lost within his dark aura that pulsed so strongly that Harry felt sick from being so close.

"It's a bit late to be out shopping, folks," Harry grinned. His eyes were dancing with suppressed mirth, but also with power and action. "Only place left open is the Three Broomsticks - pretty good grub there."

"You will die with that smile on your face, Harry," Voldemort said. Power

rolled off of him in waves, shaking the foundations of the earth and vibrating in the air.

Harry scratched his chin and sighed. "Oh, so its gonna be murder and mayhem from you lot tonight then. Why doesn't that surprise me...? Okay then, Tom. Standard procedure: You attack and I'll attack and some innocent bystanders will suffer whilst we trade blows of all too equal strength."

The people in the streets of Hogsmeade were in various states of either disbelief or fear as they realised what they were seeing in the middle of the High Street outside of Honeydukes. There were screams and pops of apparition. Fairly soon the whole town would be in an uproar.

"You've seen the end, haven't you, Harry?" Voldemort asked. Between his skeletal fingers small red sparks jumped eagerly down into his palms. "You've travelled farther and for longer than any other human being in the history of this world - of all worlds. Surely, with all that experience, you must know and see the end of our war... no?"

Harry laughed, loud and clear. "There'll be a sea of fire," he chuckled. "Storms of blood and bone. The sky will fall, the ground will crack, spewing forth torrents of liquid rock, and...."

"Hope will die," Voldemort hissed. "Valour and trust will fail. All the lives on this world will be forfeit because you held fast in your defiance."

Harry quirked an eyebrow and tapped his foot thoughtfully. Voldemort knew more than he should know, that much was clear. "Who've you been talking to then?" he asked the Dark Lord. He clenched his fists but was not aware of doing so. Something told him he knew the answer.

The five Death Eaters remained silent at their master's whim, but their wands were still trained between Harry's eyes.

"Quite a trail, Darkslayer," Voldemort said, "Quite a trail you blazed across the desolate and barren plains of existence. Do you know that Evil itself considers you an avatar for the long dead creator?"

Harry nodded. "I did know that, Tommie," he replied. "Have you been talking to the Destroyers behind my back?"

Voldemort's eyes glinted in the light and he said nothing.

Harry took a deep breath and exhaled. His face hardened and he held himself within a millisecond's reach of his power. His hands began to burn from the bubbling strength that lay just beneath the surface. "I gotta tell you, Voldie, I feel a little bit left out."

"Enough talk, Harry," Voldemort replied quietly. "It is finally time to die...."

You know, Ethan whispered, I think he may already be closer to death than we thought....

Halfway between life and death, Harry mused. Do you think we can send him the whole way?

If we can't it won't be through lack of trying.

In the same instant Harry and Voldemort's arms erupted in electric blue and crimson power respectively. Harry, the more experienced of the two, immediately created an unbreakable shield in between himself and the Dark Lord, which grew and morphed in mere half-seconds into a transparent dome that settled over Voldemort.

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry ducked as five jets of death streamed over his head, the five super Death Eaters rushing forward as Voldemort began to press his strength against the shield Harry had placed over him. Great powerful booms rocked the street as red crackles of light impacted against the transparent dome.

Harry twisted his hand, spinning on his knees, and summoned the modified pistol he kept secured in a holster around his ankle. Rolling to the left as a fresh batch of green light tried to end his life, Harry came up firing in the general direction of his enemies. The pistol was set to rapid fire and a constant stream of pulsating spheres cut the night air to shreds and cast a pale glow upon the surrounding area.

His first shot took Lucius Malfoy in the leg, bringing him down to Harry's level, whilst the other altered Death Eaters cast quick shield charms.

The unceasing rain of sphere fire cracked those shields and a few balls slipped through. Harry gritted his teeth, jumping to his feet and aiming, it seemed, solely for Peter Pettigrew.

The rat took a shot in the shoulder and, screaming as the pulse exited his back, fell behind Bellatrix - out of this fight.

Voldemort, enraged, shattered the shield Harry had placed around him and the wave of power knocked everyone back a few feet, including Harry, who screamed and began to laugh yet again, swinging his gun around towards the Dark Lord.

"BANG, BANG, BANG!" Harry cried, taken by the battle.

The citizens of Hogsmeade were diving for cover, those unable to escape, and somehow a few of the buildings had caught alight in front of, as well as behind Harry. He knew that Honeydukes had gone up in green flames once more.

Voldemort strode forward purposefully and the shining white spheres faded to nothing but sparks as he stepped forward, arms encased in crimson fire. Harry took a shot at Rabastan Lestrange and then Voldemort clicked his fingers and the gun in Harry's hand exploded, searing shards digging into his hand.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Morsmordre Incaceptium!"

Having no choice but to lose ground to the Dark Lord, Harry began to take large steps back, deflecting the curses he could and firing streams of raw power at his enemies. His shoulder was a lesson in pain and his leg was seizing from the effort. If it wasn't for his bandana then his forehead would have been dripping with sweat.

Voldemort used an incantation, one Harry remembered as belonging to the Dark Mark, but it was changed and different. A mist, of the darkest green, shot high into the night sky and then solidified in a bar of green light, not the killing curse, and cut a line through the air towards Harry.

Harry jumped backwards across cobblestones and the curse struck the

ground, but it surprised him as it *bounced* off the ground and came at him again. It got a grip on his leg, his old sore leg - the one that always took the worst beating - and suddenly he was immobilised as the flesh began to burn away.

He screamed.

Stuck on the spot, blinded by pain, Harry did the only thing he could think of as he heard more curses heading his way. He sent down tentacles of power into the ground just before him and, with a titanic effort, thrust two dozen tonnes of rock and earth up into the High Street, creating a physical barrier between himself and his enemies.

Having bought himself a few seconds, Harry bit back on the pain - forcing it from his mind - and then looked down to see the damage done to his leg. He could smell it, a putrid smell of decaying flesh, and winced when he saw the blackened lump his limb had become.

A snake and a skull were burnt atop of the dead flesh, which was decomposing before his eyes, and they shone ever brighter. Showers of dirt rained down upon Harry as curses struck his long barrier of earth.

Pain flared in his leg again and Harry had to remember to breathe, to blink, it was so terrible. He was in a bad place right then. And the curse was spreading now up through his knee towards his thigh....

"Parnas Allevia," he managed, casting the strongest poison related healing charm he knew. The pain didn't lessen an inch, but the spread of the black curse was halted at his knee. Everything below it was dead.

Harry screamed again, feeling his leg being torn away by the magic. If he could walk again after this it would be a miracle.

GET UP! Ethan roared. *UP, DAMN IT!*

But Harry couldn't - his strength had been drained now. Only about fifteen seconds had passed since he had erected his barrier. Despite the pain, he was down but not out.

And then a pair of strong hands grabbed him under his arms, and Harry looked back into a familiar and welcome face that lifted him to his feet.

The slightly crazed, scarred, and bearded face of Dermas Trask met Harry's a moment later, supporting him on his bad leg.

"Nice night for it, Potter," the Irishman laughed, glancing at the flaming mound of rock and earth a few feet away. "Let's get you out of here...."

Too late.

A series of pops rang out to Harry and Dermas's left and when they turned Voldemort was there, as well as three of his Death Eaters. Harry had taken out Wormtail, hopefully killed him, and Lucius Malfoy was having a problem making his leg work after having a portion of it blown away.

"Damn," Trask hissed as Voldemort grinned and raised his crackling crimson hand.

"VESTIC!"

BOOM!

The ground around the Dark Lord exploded and Rabastan Lestrangle was struck dead with a purple curse a moment later. Dolohov and Bellatrix were thrown off their feet and into the mound of dirt Harry had lifted to the surface.

Through the pain and over Dermas's head, Harry saw a group of wizards and witches advancing down the street, providing covering fire so Dermas could get him out of there. Lances of pain shot up his leg every time he moved it but, gritting his teeth, Harry soldiered on as he had been doing for decades.

He didn't know who this mysterious group of citizens were, nor why they would get involved, but he had a good idea. They were the vigilantes the paper mentioned and it seemed Dermas was a member of their group.

"Trask!" the witch at the front of the group cried. She was of average height with a long ponytail and sharp blue eyes that reflected the curse light in the air. "Is it him? Is it Potter?"

"Aye, it's him," Trask growled, panting under the weight of the Boy Who

Lived. He wasn't that young anymore.

Harry's leg was dead weight - nothing more now and perhaps nothing more ever again. There was the gut wrenching feeling that he may have lost the leg, but he pushed it down as a killing curse tore the air apart and struck one of the wizard's between Trask and the blond witch. The man's shield charm exploded and he crumpled to the ground.

Seeing that, and dumping it on top of everything else, Harry's pain was overcome by a rage so furious that the ground shook.

"THE NEXT ONE BETTER KILL ME," he roared, as both sides continued to trade blows, with the darker group clearly gaining ground with the advantage.

Dermas, shocked by Harry's outburst, stumbled and dropped him. Back on the ground, landing with a bump on his buttocks, Harry called his full strength into his arms and *hurled* a wall of blinding light at the three Death Eaters and Voldemort. The heat of the power was astounding and, like fire, it sucked all of the oxygen out of the air and blistered skin.

The ground cracked under the heat - expanded and then cracked. Plumes of steam swelled from the moisture trapped in the cracks and whistled like a train engine.

Dolohov, the closest enemy, was obliterated as Voldemort cast a shield between himself and the bar of purest light power. Bellatrix happened to be behind him and was saved from annihilation. Potter's light enveloped his shield and the heat inside of it rose exponentially, threatening to overcome the natural cold that the Dark Lord exuded.

Cursing, Voldemort knew he could not risk facing Potter without an army at his back, and all he had left was Bellatrix. With a wave of his hand he shimmered and disappeared - the destruction of Hogsmeade and Hogwarts would have to wait. Bellatrix apparated away as soon as her master did, and the shield collapsed and was absorbed by Harry's power.

When the light had dimmed enough to look at it, Harry and the others turned back to the street to see a rift running deep and long for about

sixty feet. It had cut clean through the small hillock Harry had erected a few minutes ago, and revealed the empty street on the other side. People were rushing to put out the flames in the town, desperate to save it once again.

There was no sign of Lucius Malfoy or Peter Pettigrew, but their blood stained the cobblestones of the street.

Harry fell down onto his back, breathing a sigh of relief as he saw that Voldemort and Bellatrix had fled. The pain had become absolute now and he doubted he could have summoned a feather at that moment, let alone fight an apocalyptic duel.

"Dear Merlin," the blond witch exclaimed, her wand pointed at the smouldering spot Voldemort had been a few seconds ago. "You killed him!" she exclaimed. "Voldemort is dead...."

Harry laughed, his eyes were wet with tears that would never fall, and he tried to move his leg. Dead, dead, dead weight....

"Greg is dead, Amy," a lithe brunette woman said, leaning down next to the man who had taken a killing curse. She sniffed and wept freely.

"Hey, Harry," Dermas said, kneeling down next to him. "What are we into this time?"

"Same old shit," Harry chuckled, embracing the pain. "Ah, Dermas, how did you know to be here?"

"The Liberty Foundation has a spy in Voldemort's ranks - we were tipped off about a quarter of an hour ago. When we got here I saw you take that green misty curse - I could tell it was you. Amy here didn't believe me," Trask grinned up at the woman. "Oh, Harry, meet Amy. She put together TLF...."

Harry grinned and winked at the witch and then his eyes rolled back into his head and he began to fit. His waist jerked upwards and his legs flailed about. He made an odd sound in the back of his throat and Dermas swore.

Looking down at his left leg, Dermas severed the denim of his black

jeans away at the seam and swore yet again at the dead flesh that met his eyes. He swayed when he caught the smell of it and knew right then that Harry was dying.

"I gotta get him to Order Headquarters," he said, reaching into his robes for a galleon. "*Portus!*"

"Did... did we get him?" Amy asked, staring hard at the crater in the street.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Dermas growled. "*Activate!*"

Ginny hadn't felt like finishing her dinner after Harry had disappeared from the table forty minutes ago, muttering something about his scar and leaving before explaining more.

The last two days or so he had spent perhaps an hour in her company - in anyone's company - and although she understood better than most the reasons he was always moving around, it did hurt that he couldn't make more time for her. But that just sounded selfish, and Ginny knew it. Harry had a hell of a job to do, and the fact that he still found time to see her at all was amazing.

Still, she wished there were more hours in the day.

"D'you think he'll be back tonight?" Ginny asked Hermione. They were seated in the living room and Ron was playing chess with Remus, who had *de-aged* several years since she had last seen him.

Harry's werewolf cure had restored some of his youth to him, and dozens of other werewolves worldwide. For curing lycanthropy alone Harry was a hero to the majority of the magical world. And yet he was still hated and feared....

Hermione sighed. "We never can tell with Harry anymore," she said, shaking her head. "He'll be fine though, Ginny. He always survives...."

Ginny nodded, biting her bottom lip. "I hope so, Hermione... I hope so."

"Knight to C-4," Ron stroked his chin and surveyed the board with a keen

eye. "Check, Remus."

Remus, although perfectly composed on the outside, was beginning to sweat on the inside. Ron was penning him into a corner, and already he was seeing defeat. It would be the third straight game he lost in half an hour - and he had considered himself an expert player of the game. Ron was a natural at it and played on a different level, always thinking a dozen, if not more, moves ahead.

"Harry will be fine, Ginny," Remus said. "Pawn to--no."

"Sweating some, Professor?" Ron smiled.

"Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley," Remus grinned, the throwback to his teaching days making him wonder if he should take up the job again and give Mad-Eye a break. Now that he was cured there was no reason why he shouldn't.

"Bishop to C-4," Remus decided upon his move.

The relative serenity of that evening was shattered a moment later as Dermas and Harry landed unceremoniously in a heap on top of the coffee table, which shattered under their combined weight.

Remus was on his feet in an instant, wand at the ready, as were Ron, Hermione and Ginny, but it only took a few seconds to recognise the two of them, and then they were really scared.

"Lupin," Trask growled. His arm was cut from the shards of glass that had been the coffee table. "Get to Hogwarts - Poppy Pomfrey. Right now! Potter's not in a good way."

Remus didn't hesitate after getting a look at Harry. He was thrashing about on the floor, drenched in sweat and gurgling what was probably blood. His left leg was blackened and throbbing with a skull and snake - the Dark Mark. He ran to the fireplace and, with a pinch of floo powder, he was gone.

"Harry!" Ginny cried, upon seeing him. "What happened?"

"Out the way," Dermas growled, and levitated Harry onto the couch and

conjured some straps to tie him to it as he continued to fit. Breathing heavily, Trask fell back now that he was secure and began to pick the glass shards from his arm.

"What happened?" Ginny asked again, pale in the face and already beginning to cry.

"Voldemort," Trask whispered. And really that was answer enough.

"His leg," Hermione shuddered. "Its... its...."

"Dead," Ron finished, standing behind the sofa above Harry. "Merlin, I think I'm gonna be sick."

A few minutes later and Harry lay still, relaxing it seemed and his eyes slowly fluttered open. They were sharp and hostile for a long moment until he realised he was among friends, and then he tried to sit up but found himself strapped down. His eyes grew unfriendly again.

"You were fitting, Harry," Trask said and removed the straps. "We had to hold you down."

"Remus went to get Madam Pomfrey, mate," Ron said, reaching down to clap him on the shoulder. "Your leg doesn't look to healthy at the moment."

Harry glared down at the offending leg and shrugged. "It doesn't hurt anymore," he said and poked it with his finger. The flesh was spongy under the pressure and split, releasing a steady stream of dark blood. The leg was dead, done for.

"Oh, don't do that, Harry," Hermione bit her lip and Harry, Harry damn him, he smiled.

Ginny sat down before him on the floor and wrapped her arms across his chest, pushing the side of her head against his. "You've done it this time," she whispered, her voice shaking.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I guess Voldemort gets a point for this one."

"Don't joke, Harry," she sniffed. "Please don't."

For a moment he grew serious. "At this stage in the game, Gin, I don't know how to do anything else."

"What's going on in here?" a familiar voice asked from across the room.

Molly Weasley and Nymphadora Tonks strode across the room and gasped when they saw Harry. Mrs. Weasley paled at the sight of him, or more specifically his leg, and Tonks drew her wand and began to cast a diagnostic spell on the... wound.

Harry didn't try to stop her, but wasn't surprised in the least when her magic failed to take hold. The white stream of light was deflected away from the leg and spread out in the air above it. Tonks frowned and tried again to the same result.

"Voldemort did this," Harry said. "His magic - our magic - our rules. I'm sorry, Tonks, but you can't do a thing to the leg."

"Can you?" the Auror asked, her hair turning from blue to black.

Harry clicked his teeth together a few times and gazed down at his leg. "Too late," he said, and before anyone could question him the fireplace flared to life and Madam Pomfrey *flooded* into Grimmauld Place, closely followed by a healthy looking Remus.

"I see your talent for getting into trouble hasn't lessened any in the time you've been away, Mr. Potter," the matron said, shaking her head as soon as she saw his leg. "What... what caused this?"

Harry smirked. "An arrogant six foot tall snake," he said. "Our old friend Voldemort."

As Tonks had done, Madam Pomfrey began to run diagnostic spells against his leg - to the same result. The bands of colour met an invisible barrier over his leg and hovered uselessly in the air above it. The sofa had, at this point, turned a dark crimson under Harry's bleeding leg.

"I don't... understand," Poppy Pomfrey said.

"This injury was caused by a curse using raw, pure magic - tainted by the Dark Lord, Madam Pomfrey," Harry said, quite calmly. "It... it can't be

healed." Harry's voice wavered there but it was the only time it did.

"You're bleeding to death," she exclaimed.

Ginny sat behind Harry stroking his hair, and it was then that the realisation hit her. Harry was going to lose.... "No, no, no...." she whispered, audible to no one else.

"If I can't heal it then...." Madam Pomfrey trailed away as a dark mood fell over the room.

Harry laughed. What else was there to do?

"Oh, Harry," Ginny whispered.

"We should get you to St. Mungo's," Poppy insisted. "There are specialist Healers there that can--"

"No, no, and no," Harry shook his head. "For a few reasons: One, I won't endanger the sick with my presence. Two, I can't be seen in such a public place for reasons that are my own... and three, this leg is dead - you know that, Poppy. There's nothing for it but the bone saw."

Hermione sniffed and swayed against Ron, who held her tight and stared grimly down at Harry. Derms Trask sat silently across the room in an armchair, tapping his fingers together thoughtfully. The poor bastard was right, the Irishman knew.

Madam Pomfrey took a deep breath and closed her eyes, counting slowly to ten. "Are you sure you understand what you're asking me to do, Mr. Po--Harry?"

"Look," he said, shaking his head slowly. "After all these years Voldemort finally got a piece of me. It's unfortunate, it is tragic, but there's nothing for it but to carry on regardless. Madam Pomfrey, the curse that did this is contained just below the knee for now, but it is fighting to break free. I'll be dead within the hour if you don't cut my leg off."

Ron seemed to be moved by something in Harry's voice. "And it you don't do it," he told her, "...I will...."

Harry laughed yet again and gave Ron a thumbs up. "Thanks, mate, I think...."

Ginny wept openly and stroked his cheek. Harry reached up with his hand to grasp hers but then stopped. His right hand, his inner hand - palm and fingers - was still all bloody and torn from when the gun had exploded. A few of the metal shards were twisted into that wound.

"Here's one you can heal," Harry said, and offered his hand to the matron.

Ten minutes later and Harry was lying on a cold metal table that had been conjured in the middle of the room over the remains of the coffee table. The metal... operating... table had raised edges to stop any *spillages* from seeping onto the floor and his leg was strapped down tightly with thick leather straps around his dead ankle, his dead shin, and his upper thigh.

Madam Pomfrey stood over him, her wand glowing and her eyes ringed with tears. She whispered a spell and a white glowing ring appeared just below Harry's knee, on the clean - alive - flesh as close to the dead as possible.

A heartbreaking, nervous silence fell over the room, until it was broken by Molly Weasley. "I can't watch!" she wailed, and fled from the room. Tonks followed and, after squeezing Harry's shoulder, Remus did as well.

Dermas nodded to Harry, who winked back, and that made the old blade master grin before he, too, left the room.

Ron, Hermione, and Ginny stood around the table in different states of shock. They wouldn't leave him - couldn't leave him, but they all found it hard to believe that Harry could take this with the same indifference and weak sense of humour that he took, well, *everything* with.

The fireplace suddenly flared to life with green flames and Albus Dumbledore stepped into Grimmauld Place, his face a wash of emotion and his eyes holding no twinkle whatsoever. Madam Pomfrey hesitated when he appeared, having been reaching into her medicine bag for a

numbing potion.

"Hiya, Dumbledore," Harry said, feeling tired all of a sudden. He wanted today over with.

"Harry, I've just come from Hogsmeade. I was told you...."

"You were told I was drinking underage at the Three Broomsticks?" Harry smiled and Ginny squeezed his shoulder. "I confess, Professor, although whether or not I'm underage is open to interpretation."

"You saved the town from destruction," Dumbledore said, his eyes falling on Harry's strapped down dead leg. "This is... no time for jokes...."

Harry chuckled and grasped Ginny's hand. His hand wasn't shaking, which surprised her. "I was just trying to deflect attention away from my obvious heroism, sir."

"The leg needs to come off, Albus," Madam Pomfrey said. "It can't be saved."

Dumbledore paled and closed his eyes. When he opened them he was gazing down at Harry with tears beginning to well behind his glasses. "I am truly sorry, Harry...."

Harry nodded. "It's now or never, Madam Pomfrey," he then said, turning to the elderly matron. "I can't keep the poison beneath the knee forever."

The skull and snake of the Dark Mark seemed to grin up at Harry as he glared down at his useless leg. *Some good will come of this*, he thought. After it was gone it would no longer pain him....

Can you replace it? Ethan asked. *Create a new, stronger one?*

I'm going to try, mate, Harry replied.

"Drink this, Mr. Potter," Madam Pomfrey handed him a vial of cream coloured potion. "It will numb your leg - both legs, actually."

Harry swallowed the potion and tossed the vial aside.

The shining ring around his leg swirled slightly as the potion took effect. Removing a small knife from her medical bag, Madam Pomfrey stabbed

the good flesh above his knee. "Can you feel that?" she asked. Harry shook his head and she healed the small gash. "Okay..."

"This is still going to hurt, isn't it?" Hermione asked - she was shaking involuntarily. All the blood had drained from her face and it looked as if Ron was holding her up on his own. He hadn't said much yet, had Ron, after offering to cut off the leg himself.

"There will be some... discomfort, yes," Madam Pomfrey said. "Here, bite down on this, Potter." She put a piece of thick leather into his mouth and Harry clamped it between his teeth.

"Be brave, guys," he mumbled through the leather and then laughed again.

Getting down to business, Madam Pomfrey began to mutter a string of incantations around the glowing ring just below his knee. Harry couldn't feel anything yet, and he had leaned back so he could look up at Ginny. Tears were streaming down her face and her lower lip trembled. *Harry* squeezed *her* hand reassuringly.

"The ring will become razor sharp in a moment," Poppy Pomfrey said, keeping her wand steady over his knee. "It will then contract, Harry, shrink in on itself through your leg. You'll feel it... but the ring is now also scorching to the touch. It will cauterize the wound as the leg is sliced away."

Harry removed the leather biting piece for a moment. "Genius," he said dryly. "Well, better get the show on the road then...."

"We can find a magical replacement, Harry," Dumbledore said. "You will walk again."

Way ahead of you, Harry thought.

"Bite down now, Harry," Madam Pomfrey said. Apparently the ring was ready.

Hermione gasped and turned into Ron's shoulder as Harry crunched the hard leather between his teeth. Ron lost his nerve as well and buried his head into Hermione's bushy hair.

Ginny kept her eyes locked on Harry's when it happened. A slight tightening of his eyes and a muffled grunt were all the sign he gave a few seconds later, and only when she caught a whiff of his burnt, but sealed, flesh did she realise that it was done.

Harry had just lost his leg.

The Darkslayer coughed and spat out the strap of leather. He reached up to his forehead and removed his bandana, which was drenched with sweat, and pressed his hand against his scar.

Done and done... Ethan mumbled, as Harry sat up slightly to get a look at his... stump.

"A success...." Madam Pomfrey said hollowly.

"Oh, Harry," Ginny whispered.

"Some... someone should tell Remus, Tonks...." Hermione managed, meeting Harry's eyes but pointedly not looking below his waist.

Harry snorted. "I'll race you to the kitchen," he joked.

Despite himself, and against the mood in the room, Ron laughed and Harry winked at him.

"A dark day," Dumbledore said. "You will need a replacement soon, I would imagine."

Harry shrugged. "I can do it now, actually." He banished the straps holding what remained of his leg down and sat up on the table. He almost fell, off balance now, but put out his hand to steady him on his legless side.

Looking at the black lump off his lower leg and foot, Harry felt regret now for having lost it, but quickly summoned power into his palms and enveloped the hideous, unrecognisable mess. Everyone in the room felt a wave of heat and felt a rush of wind before the power faded. The dead leg disintegrated, disappeared entirely, and was already beginning to fade from Harry's mind, too.

Still...

"I'll miss that leg," he said, frowning in thought at the perfect wound beneath his knee. "I've had it since I was born...."

"Harry," Ginny sighed, choking back tears, "that's not funny."

Harry shrugged. "No, I guess not...."

The skin beneath his knee was sealed perfectly, seamlessly, and without a scar. Madam Pomfrey knew what she was doing. He said as much and thanked her.

"You must be the only person on the planet who would thank me for amputating their leg, Mr. Potter," she said, fumbling around in her medical bag and removing a few more vials of potion. "That is going to hurt soon enough," she said. "These pain relief potions will help with the worst of it."

Harry accepted them gratefully and then ran his hand cautiously over the sealed wound beneath his knee. He couldn't help the shudder that ran through him.

"What colour should my new leg be?" he then asked the room at large. Mrs. Weasley, Remus, Tonks and Dermas were coming back into the sitting room through the kitchen door now, all of them unable not to look at Harry's stump.

"Red and gold - Gryffindor colours," Ron grinned. He was taking the loss of Harry's leg almost as well as Harry.

"Ronald!" both Hermione and Mrs. Weasley snapped, and Ron flushed.

Harry recalled the chiding Mrs. Weasley had given him last night after he had finally returned to Grimmauld Place to face the music. She had raged at him for not keeping in contact for the few weeks they had been away - especially Ron and Ginny - and at the same time was so relieved that he hadn't really cut himself away from his friends that she smothered him with back-breaking hugs....

He was the Darkslayer, the Boy Who Lived, Harry bloody Potter - a man who had toppled worlds, scoured planets, washed away nations and fought enough wars to last a thousand men's lifetimes... and he had

quailed slightly under Mrs. Weasley's ranting. If some of his enemies could have seen him then, both past and present, they would have died laughing.

"Red and gold titanium....?" Harry mused. "If no one has any other suggestions.... Ginny?"

"No, Harry," she said faintly. "No."

"Settled then," Harry smiled and his hands flared to life with blue power that hummed softly like electricity. "Let's see..."

He pressed his hand against his inner thigh - on the shorter leg without the black jean leg covering it and blue lines of the power began to jump across it and over to his knee. A fountain of blue sparks spewed from the end and Harry increased the rate of power, forcing his will and what he wanted into the magic.

It wasn't that hard, really, but he wanted to make it extraordinarily strong, and that took a little more effort. A sphere of blue light encased his knee and then began to grow, stretch, down into the empty space his full leg and foot used to fill. A faint, shimmering outline of a new leg appeared.

"While that is doing that," Harry said, looking up into half a dozen stunned faces. "I need to take to Dermal about his friends."

"The Liberty Foundation?" Trask asked and nodded when Harry nodded. "An anti-Voldemort group that has a few spies in Voldemort's ranks. I don't know who the spies are but apparently one is fairly high up - and hasn't been given a power boost by the Dark Wanker yet. Amy told me he had strict orders to flee if Voldemort offered it."

Harry's leg continued to grow. "You're a member of the group?"

Trask nodded. "Amy... we were an item many years ago, after I lost my fiancé in the First Dark War. There wasn't much happiness in the aftermath of that fight, and we... were *happy* with each other."

Ron smirked and Hermione punched him.

"She founded the group just before Fudge was killed a few months ago,"

Trask continued. "I joined because I could...."

"Do you think your Liberty Foundation would like to work with me?" Harry asked. "I could use spies and the manpower."

"I'll arrange a meeting."

The metal forming below Harry's knee was white hot, but could now be seen clearly as a leg. His foot was of equal shape to his real foot, but there was little point in putting toes on the damn thing, so Harry ended it with an incline as if toes were there. He wanted his boots to fit, after all.

As it cooled, the hardened titanium took on a golden colour, tinged with red and Harry added a final touch. He flicked his wrist and two small sparks jumped onto the metal and took on the shape of a lion, like the one he could recall sitting in stone above the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. It roamed freely across his new leg.

"I reckon that'll do it," Harry nodded, pleased at his work. The metal was damn near unbreakable after the temperature he had heated it to. It was cool now and he rubbed the join beneath his knee where his real leg became titanium. There was a slight groove, just a thin line, but when he was wearing jeans or robes his leg would be indistinguishable from the real thing.

Harry swung his legs around off the table and stood up.

"Mr. Potter!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed. "You've just been through a traumatic operation. You shouldn't be moving for at least a day - two would be better."

"I can't spare five minutes," Harry grumbled, putting his weight tentatively on the metal leg and taking a few steps around the room. His limp was gone and the pain that had been buried deep in his bone no longer existed - just like the bone.

It was worth losing the leg to lose that pain, Harry told Ethan.

It was hairy and scarred beyond repair anyway, Ethan laughed.

Slowing me down, Harry agreed.

"It's too big," Trask grinned. "Makes you look lopsided to your right."

Harry frowned and glanced down at his legs and then up to try and judge the slant of the room. He could correct it if--

"Oh very funny," Harry growled, waving Dermas away.

"What happened, Harry?" Remus asked. "How did *this* happen?"

Harry sighed and fell back into an armchair. His knee bent the rest of his leg as it normally would. The new limb was fully functional. Ginny squeezed into the armchair next to him, and a rush of exhilaration spread through Harry at the close contact.

Harry thought it safe to say their relationship was progressing at a snail's pace, but it was progressing. He had dreamt of little else for a century but being this close to Ginny, and now that he had it war was once again monopolising his time. She smelt faintly of lime, and her auburn hair shimmered in the faint light. Her hand came to a rest on top of his, gently touching the half healed cuts on his knuckles.

Talk of cake in Paris was all very well - and a nice dream - but it was nothing if he never saw her, held her... or at the very least talked to her. He had to make the time - simply had to, otherwise what the hell was he fighting for?

Himself? For revenge? Those were not good enough reasons, and never would be.

He was fighting for Ginny now - always for Ginny. Or, more broadly, for *love*. A feeling, an emotion, a state of humanity that was worth fighting for. After all the hate and suffering he had seen and inflicted across the years, Harry knew the only chance to redeem his soul - if such a possibility existed - rested in love.

Or maybe self-sacrifice, Ethan offered. *I hear your God is into that kind of shit.*

I'd move the heavens for Ginny, Harry replied, looking over at Remus with unfocused eyes. *I did move the heavens for her - that has to count for something.*

Time will tell - if it does not end first.

"Time is relative. It is individual to each and every one of us," Harry replied, but out loud. He attracted one or two queer looks at that and just shook his head.

"I didn't know you were a fan of Einstein, Harry," Hermione smiled. Spots of colour had returned to her face after Harry's magical leg had appeared, but she still seemed a little weak and weary.

"God does not play dice with the universe," Harry said, and then was overcome with a fit of laughter that had him struggling to breathe. "Rather apt, if you spent a century gambling everything for another chance...."

Not everyone in the room understood that. Dumbledore did, however, and Harry's laughter was infectious. The old man chuckled and sat down in an armchair opposite Harry, looking at him with kind, warm eyes.

"What happened in Hogsmeade, Harry?" Remus pressed.

Harry sighed and threw his arm across Ginny's shoulders. He made slow circles on her upper arm with the tips of his fingers and then looked into Remus's eyes. "I played dice with the universe... and... I didn't lose, but I got my ass seriously kicked."

"You lost a leg," Remus said, his tone heavy.

Harry blinked and then remembered the new metal limb. *Christ*, he thought, *I'd already forgotten...* Whilst he had been talking his mind had been miles away, looking at the holes in his plan and the other aspects he had yet to set in motion - those parts that were already moving and would need his attention soon. His loss of limb had been forgotten - he had moved on within ten minutes.

Ginny must have seen something of this on his face. "You forget about it, didn't you," she whispered sadly and rested her cheek against his shoulder. "What are we going to do with you, Harry?"

"I'll be fine as long as I get some cake on my birthday," he smiled. "A big cake," he added as an afterthought. "With chocolate sprinkles and

letters that say '*Happy Birthday Harry*'."

"Harry," Remus said, slightly frustrated. "The cake isn't as important as what happened in Hogsmeade. We need to know."

Harry frowned. "You undervalue the cake, Remus," he said seriously, and then grinned. "As for Hogsmeade... well, it was Harry saves the world, the end."

"Good story," Ron said. "Short and to the point."

Harry agreed. "If only all the chapters in my life were that short, or this war we're caught up in ended as simply...."

He had potential new allies now, and that was good. There were too few in the world, and as far as he knew none beyond it. And, on top of that, this nightmare week was almost over. It had been one of the worst he could remember leading up to his birthday. He was raging against fate again....

First there had been that disaster in Perth, and then the Death Eaters had attacked the Ministry and he'd nearly been cruciod to death, and then there was the crazy centaur drug vision which would haunt him to the end of his days, and the attack yesterday in Diagon Alley, and now this whole leg nonsense in Hogsmeade.

A hell of a week, and there were still two days of it left....

[Chapter 21 – Crumbling Realities and a Late Italian Breakfast](#)

What happens to the wide-eyed observer when the window between reality and unreality breaks and the glass begins to fly?

~~Stephen King

July 31st

Harry had been asleep for only three hours when the sun rose over London on the morning of the 31st. The last two days, since he lost his leg, had been relatively peaceful for the most part but still unbelievably busy. He awoke to the first rays of sunlight and flexed his shoulder instinctively against the dull pain that bit at it.

He was lying half dressed in bed in the room on the second floor of Grimmauld Place, and as he rolled over his leg – the metal one – wouldn't budge. Sitting up, Harry glanced down at it and saw that, whilst he slept, he had kicked his strong limb right through the wall and it hung jarred in there now.

Wrenching it free, Harry headed over to the en suite bathroom.

The knowledge that today was his birthday had completely slipped his mind, which was, as always, examining his plans and creating more – thinking great things about the great wars. For a moment he stared out of the bathroom window and over the rooftops of London, through the smog that was illuminated by the sun in the east.

This is my world, he thought. I'll be damned if I'll let it go up in flames!

You're damned anyway, Ethan shrugged.

Showering quickly, Harry put on a pair of black jeans to make sure no one could see his metal leg. His stub of a metal foot, the left one, clunked across the floor until he pulled on his boots and then fitted his bandana over the scar to keep his fringe out of his eyes. In a holster attached to his right boot he strapped a replacement pistol to the one he lost two nights ago.

Looking around the room for a shirt, he saw that the one he took off a few hours ago was filthy – stained not with blood but with sweat and dirt. He had been training with the army in Australia. That was his only shirt in the room, too, and he had never been a deft hand at cleaning charms. Mrs.

Weasley had obviously done his washing for him, however, as his other dirty clothes were missing.

Shirtless, he headed down to the laundry room and found a pile of his clothes. He slipped on a tight fitting shirt over his scarred chest and then proceeded to the kitchen to eat. It was still early in the morning, and the house was still asleep. He made himself some toast and jam and a cup of coffee.

Remus and Tonks found him there, sipping his coffee, ten minutes later. They had been on duty all night for the Order and had just got in. There had been a Death Eater attack in a Muggle town on the border between Scotland and England. Three thousand people had been killed in secret and their bodies had disappeared. Remus suspected that they had been turned into Inferi.

“Harry,” the former werewolf said, surprised but delighted to see him there. He hadn’t seen him at all since the amputation two nights ago. He was so busy, Apparating from one place to the next and rarely coming back to Grimmauld Place. “Didn’t think we’d see you....”

“Happy birthday, kid,” Tonks smiled, playfully punching him in the arm and sitting down next to him.

Harry frowned and then recalled the date. “Oh yeah,” he said. “Birthday.”

“Seventeen today, Harry” Remus grinned, and poured himself and Tonks a cup of coffee from the pot Harry had made.

Harry nodded, looking around at the old Black kitchen and seeing beyond it into the horrors of his own memory. “Seventeen... I’ve spent seventeen years on this planet.”

“We got you a present,” Tonks grinned and then nodded to Remus. “It’s upstairs though – we didn’t think we’d see you today.”

“I’ll go get it,” Remus said.

After he was gone, Harry was quite content to stare into space and hold his half drained coffee mug, but Tonks seemed to be wide awake and curious. Her gaze was disturbing him and he raised an eyebrow in question.

“So,” she said, and her hair changed from a dark black to deep purple. “What’ve you been up to, kid?” she asked. “Besides losing the leg, of course.”

Harry shrugged. “Dermas arranged a meeting with the group of vigilantes calling themselves the Liberty Foundation. I met them – they’re a bunch of kids, Tonks,” he sighed. “Looking for a fight, they are, and they’re gonna get one.”

Harry was tired, Tonks saw, unbelievably so. His eyes were shrunken into his skull and he was unshaven, but despite all that she knew he was completely and unerringly alert for any sign whatsoever of danger. Tonks was glad, not for the first time, that she was not Harry Potter’s enemy.

“We’re all going to have to fight, Harry,” Tonks told him, and then blushed that she had told *him* that. Telling Harry Potter that there was fighting to be done was like telling a fish that water was wet.

His sharp and hard gaze pierced her eyes, searching for something she thought, and then softened as he rubbed the side of his head and sighed. “Can I ask you a question, Tonks?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Harry nodded and absently scratched at the table with his thumb for a moment. “What would you say if I told you,” he began, “that this entire world could be destroyed. I mean completely and utterly blasted out of existence, reduced to something less than dust.”

“Not a happy thought,” Tonks said, smiling wryly. “But okay.”

Harry continued. "Then that there was a war being fought elsewhere – in different worlds and different universes all across time and creation."

"Sounds intense, or like a muggle fantasy novel."

Harry grinned. "Sort of yeah," he agreed. "This war is the Last War, Tonks, and it is being fought by Good and Evil in their true forms, without any deceptions or masked falsehoods. Now imagine that Evil is winning that war, for whatever reason – say because the hopes of Good were placed on the shoulders of someone unable to carry it – and that if Evil won, then everything would be destroyed. Not just our world, but everything anywhere in

Existence. Even the realm of the dead, wherever that may be."

Tonks frowned and stared at Harry carefully. "Are we still talking hypothetically here, Harry?"

"I never said we were," Harry replied. "Let's continue. Now, the army of Destroyers – of Evil – can't win until that soldier for the Light, the bloke who was struggling under the weight of hope, is destroyed. But he beat them once before, in a different reality, so they're gathering their entire force to crush this bloke on his home world."

"Where is this going, Harry?"

"Please just listen. The entire army of Destroyers is coming to destroy one human being, albeit a powerful one, and that isn't the worst of it. He has greater enemies as well, one of equal power and strength. All of his enemies are converging on one world, say this world, Tonks. They are all coming here to destroy one insignificant bastard."

"This is real, isn't it, Harry?" Tonks whispered, fear flashing in her eyes.

Harry sighed and turned away. "Would you, in my place, Tonks, destroy this entire world to end a war that is destroying everything else? Would
six

billion lives be worth sacrificing for the greater good of infinity? Do I destroy our planet or do I fight and lose, be swept away in failure and finally death? I honestly don't know what to do...."

Tonks blinked. "Well, I live on this planet, Harry," she replied. "So I'd say fight and *win*."

Harry smiled sadly. "Is it that easy?"

"It should be."

"Here we go, Harry," Remus said, coming back into the kitchen carrying a small velvet box. "This is from Tonks and I. Sorry its not beautifully wrapped."

"Thank you," Harry said, accepting the present. He flipped open the lid and beheld a long silver chain that looped back on itself. He picked it up and threaded it through his fingers.

"Its white gold," Tonks smiled. "We found it at a jewellers in the muggle world. Apparently this is something that Muggles give their kids when they become adults."

Harry undid the clasp and slipped it around his neck. It hung down on his shirt and felt cool against his skin. "It's great...." he whispered. "Thanks, guys."

"Are you sticking around today?" Remus asked. "I know a lot of people want to wish you a happy birthday."

Harry rubbed his face and thought about it for a moment. He had a lot to do – a lot. The least of all was going to see the British Prime Minister. For some reason the man hadn't sent the weapons he had promised, and there had been no communications sent to the Twilight Guardians either. It was concerning, but not overly important.

Then there was the army and the scouts he had to send out into enemy

territory which, as it stood, was everywhere outside of Australia. The Liberty Foundation wanted to place a member of their faction near him, as an advisor. He sighed and shook all these thoughts away....

"I'll stay for today," he said, and smiled slowly. "Yeah, I will."

"Excellent," Remus grinned. "We'll have to bake you a cake then."

"With sprinkles?" Tonks asked.

Remus shrugged. "I don't know. We'll have to ask Harry – sprinkles, Harry?"

"Sprinkles would make my day, Remus," the Saviour of Time and Creation said.

?????

Billions of exits to billions of worlds he had flown by – never stopping, never resting – always moving.

Millions of those worlds had lain in ruin – the Guardians had failed there – but some were still fighting, and millions remained yet untouched. The Destroyers, for some reason, had ceased their domination of all of the realms in Creation.

The Guardian Godric Gryffindor could not, for the life of him, figure out what could have stopped the Destroyers on their wave of annihilation across the Boundary and through the Stream. But he had a fairly good idea...

Harry Potter.

Perhaps he was grasping at nothing but air, but he felt as if that boy had somehow diverted the attention of the Destroyers for the time being.

Which was good, in a way, but not if they destroyed him for it.

Gryffindor knew he had to hurry. Potter's world was up ahead, only days away now – or however long time decided to stretch in this tortured and ruined wasteland that was once the peaceful Boundary.

He could not fail, but he was at the edge of his strength, and his enemies were closing in around him.

After draining his coffee mug and being hustled out of the kitchen by Remus and Tonks, who wanted to get started on his cake (and he *wasn't* allowed to see it until it was done) Harry sat down for five minutes alone in the living room, staring at the embers in the fireplace.

Three hours sleep a night wasn't enough, he knew. He woke up feeling as he had done before he went to sleep – tired and used up. Some people could survive on three, even two, hours a night, but Harry wasn't one of them. He needed more, but could not get it. Not because he wouldn't allow himself more, but because he *couldn't* allow himself more.

He'd tried, last night, to sleep longer than the usual scattered number of hours, but some little switch in his mind woke him up exactly three hours after he had drifted away. And that three hour window was closing, as well. It had been four hours a few weeks ago, and it was only getting smaller.

I'm sick, Harry thought, in the mind.

And it was effecting his judgement and even his vision. Black spots spun before his eyes when he rose or moved quickly, and he found himself forgetting short term things – like making the coffee only about half an hour ago. He knew he had done it, because he could still taste it on his tongue, but it was an effort to recall the actual coffee making process.

Harry was just existing, from one moment to the next, whilst juggling a war which threatened everything. Should he forget a part of his plans the whole house of cards could come tumbling down – *no*, would come tumbling down – and this show called creation would finally be done.

Insomnia, he knew his condition was called. A sleeping sickness, which was damn near impossible to beat in the most severe of cases. Harry thought, now that he was down to three hours a night, that his case might be progressing to severe.

And it wasn't good enough.

He was angry at himself for being so weak. There he was, having survived it all, and was now being undone by a lack of sleep.

"The spirit is willing, Harry," Ethan said. He had appeared before the fireplace, to Harry's eyes at least, and pretended to warm his hands over the glowing coals. "Figure this one out, before it kills you."

"I'm too tired to think about this," he sighed, stroking his fingers across the fabric of the armchair. "But not sleepy, no.... There's a difference between being tired and being sleepy."

But what did I honestly expect? Harry wondered. That all of my adventuring, all of my wars, all of the life lost and battles raged would not effect me in some way? Did I really think it wouldn't? A fool if I did.

There were cracks in his mind that were gaping chasms from which insanity, and it seemed insomnia, now seeped. Some of those cracks were poorly patched, others half-broken. He was falling apart, slowly – Harry was dying, at long last.

"It was never the war or the magic that was going to kill you," Ethan said, quietly. Almost inaudible. "Your own damn stubbornness is going to do that."

Talk to someone about this, Harry. You're not alone anymore."

Harry waved him away and Ethan, with a sigh and a shake of his head, disappeared. He *could* do this on his own – he could! Blast it, he had done *everything* else alone and was still alive to tell the tale, however unbelievable that tale may be. No, he would be fine. There was no need to worry
Gi—

“Harry birthday, stranger,” Ginny said, entering the room in her pyjamas with a brilliant smile on her face. Her arms were open before she was within ten feet of him and, against the protests of his tired limbs (the remaining ones) Harry stood and embraced her before the armchair.

“Mornin’, Gin,” he smiled.

“Thought you would have been off saving the world,” she replied, and they both sat down in the armchair. Harry’s pulse raced with the close contact.

“Forgotten all about your birthday....”

Harry grinned, sheepishly. “I did forget,” he said. “Remus reminded me before I could get away. He and Tonks got me this chain – white gold, they said.”

Ginny fingered the necklace before letting it fall back against his chest. “Very flash,” she said. “I’ve got you a present as well, of course.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Is it sweets?”

“No such luck, Mr. Potter,” Ginny said. “You’ll see what it is later.”

She was gazing into his eyes at this point and, being Ginny, she saw that something was the matter almost instantly. Quickly, she swung her legs up and over his and, with her arms, pinned his shoulders against the chair – entangling them both.

“All right,” she said. “Out with it... what’s the problem? You’re not going anywhere until you tell me.”

Harry found that he liked being tangled up in Ginny and said as much. She punched him playfully and just waited for his answer. Harry found he was too tired to lie, to make even himself believe what he said, so he told her the truth – Harry bared his emotions, and his fears, and that probably shocked her to her core.

“I can’t sleep,” he told her. “And it’s killing me at the worst possible time.”

“Don’t say that,” she whispered. “Anything but that....”

“I’ve a helluva responsibility to this world, Gin, to all worlds. I didn’t start it, I didn’t want anything to do with it – ever – but I reckon it would have happened anyway somehow. Now I’ve got to end it, and I can’t do that with only three hours of sleep a night.”

“Then have a lie in,” Ginny shrugged.

Harry smiled sadly. “I’ve tried – I just lie there awake for hours.”

“Dreamless Sleep Potion?”

Harry shook his head. “Those things put you to sleep, but they’re no good for actually restoring your energy, Gin. In fact, I think they do some damage there.”

“Well then,” Ginny began, but although she kept talking Harry failed to hear it..... Her lips moved, but the sound didn’t reach his ears.

A sliver light flowed between them and Harry followed it with his eyes, knowing that only he could see it. He turned his head to look around the room, and at the myriad of colours that were assaulting his vision. Sparks of gold and silver burst from the fireplace, and the rims of the portraits all flowed with purple light. The windows seemed to be *melting*, their glass a colour that pooled at the foot of the wall.

Harry was short of breath, his head exploded with pain, and suddenly he

was shaking all over.

“Harry!” Ginny cried. “Harry! Harry! What happened?”

He could hear again, and the pain vanished as if it had never been. He looked around the room to see everything as it was and as it should be in its normal place. The colours were gone and his head was clear. What had just happened.... he felt as if he knew that something grave had just transpired, and that he was sensitive to it....

“What happened?” Ginny asked again, calming down as Harry’s shakes disappeared.

“I... I don’t—” But he did know, as Ethan’s laughter echoed through his mind. It was terrifying, and a sign that everything was marching inevitably towards the end.

“Tell me, Harry,” Ginny said. “I... I felt a... *shiver*... run through me. What was it?”

Harry laughed – it was not reassuring to Ginny. “A... a door in reality,” he began, trying to find the words. “*We felt it!*” he exclaimed, laughing again. “A door, Gin, a door in the wall of reality has just been blasted off its hinges. It must have crippled under the weight of all the... the... *evil* gathering just outside of our world. Yes....”

Harry’s eyes were maddening, and shining faintly with a light that was not comforting in the least. “Harry, you’re scaring me....”

Harry blinked and his eyes focused on her, lightless this time and carrying the fatigue he felt. “It really is ending,” he breathed, shaking his head and holding her a little too tightly. “Reality is unravelling, buckling even....”

“That’s terrible,” Ginny whispered and looked around the room, as if waiting for it all to fall away. A moment later she realised she was waiting for just that because, as Harry had said, it was really happening. “How...

how much time do you think—?”

Harry shrugged. “Not long.... months, I’d say. I hope its months. But that’s not what worries me at the moment.”

What the hell does then? Ginny wondered, and as if he had read her thoughts on her face, Harry answered.

“A safeguard, a defence of our world, of our reality, has just failed, Ginny,” Harry said. “I know that – I *feel* that – as I know the sky is blue. What worries me now... is what will come through the gap it left... there are true horrors out there that our reality has never even imagined. I reckon the shit just hit the fan!”

“Again?” Ginny sighed, wrapping her arms around his neck. “And on your birthday, too.”

Harry blinked and took pause at that. “Yeah,” he eventually said. “Let’s not let it bother us. I’ll slay the dragon if I have to, but for now let’s... hmmm... what do kids like us do these days?”

Ginny smiled and ran her fingers down Harry’s face, over the small scars, and onto his neck and shoulder. “Well, they *don’t* talk about the decay of reality, for a start. I don’t know... it’s your day. What do you want to do, Harry?”

“What d’you say to pizza and a movie?” Harry asked. “I promise to have you home by ten.”

An hour later and Ron and Hermione had risen, wished Harry a happy birthday, and then – like Remus in the kitchen – had kicked him and Ginny out of the living room, claiming that they had to make some firecalls and he couldn’t be around for them and ruin the surprise.

So, having been kicked out of most of the house, Harry led Ginny

upstairs and she went to get dressed while he sat in his room twiddling his thumbs.

He had heard Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen, so he was looking forward to his cake – with her help it would probably be beyond good.

Still, Harry knew his friends had something planned for him today, and who was he to stop them? Ginny was a distraction for the next few hours, as

Ron and Hermione made arrangements, and they had to get out of the house. Harry thought of the places he could go – Australia to check on the preparations and the army – but then thought that Ginny probably wouldn't want to do that.

We can go on a date, he thought, scratching the back of his head. *It may have been over a hundred years since I've been on one but I'm sure I can make it work....*

I've been through your memories, Ethan said. *Last date you went out on was your third ever, and it was with Padma Patil into Hogsmeade. Your second was her as well, and the first was Cho Chang.*

Harry struggled to remember that and smiled when he did. "Oh yeah," he smiled softly. "I'd all but forgotten that. I wonder if she's still alive...."

Of course she is, he told himself. *Only been two months or so for her.*

A moment before it happened, Harry sensed the space in the air bend before two audible pops announced the arrival of the Weasley twins. Dressed in their swish dragon hide jackets, and hauling a trunk between them, Fred and George grinned when they found him leaning against the window in his room.

"Harry, my good son," Fred or George said.

"Our dear mother has just informed us that you were up here."

"And told us to tell you to stay out of the kitchen, whilst threatening us

quite severely with an egg whisk.” The twins put the trunk down carefully, very carefully. Harry had an idea about what was in it, and he was thankful for their caution.

“Anyways, Minister Potter,” one of them said. “I, and my brother George, wish you a most happy seventeenth birthday.”

Harry grinned and nodded his thanks.

“As you know,” George now said. George was on the left, yes, on the left. “You are now of age. You may do magic outside of school. However, with this new power comes great responsibility,” he continued, shaking his head slowly in a wistful way.

“Indeed,” Fred added. “You must now pay taxes, I’m afraid, Harry. 14% of your yearly income.”

“Outrageous!” Harry said, with false exclamation.

“That said,” George continued, and the twins moved in on Harry, “adding tax evasion to your long list of crimes would probably go unnoticed.” They slapped him on the back and Harry shook their hands. “I hear the Americans want you executed for crimes against humanity, and taking away the civil liberties of Death Eaters.”

Harry shrugged. “If by taking away civil liberties they mean executing,” he said. “Then I guess I’m guilty of that one.”

Fred and George nodded soberly. “The Germans say the IC wasn’t founded so one fool wizard could flout its laws to the whole world,” Fred said.

“Italy wants you hung, drawn and quartered, old boy,” George added.

“The African nations demand life imprisonment—”

“Whilst India, and even Belgium, are for the Dementor’s Kiss.”

“But that,” Fred said, with a frown, “would mean asking V-V-V-Voldemort.” He exaggerated the stutter. “For a Dementor.”

“I heard Iceland wanted me burnt at the stake,” Harry said. “China has a few instruments of torture that rival the Dementors, and they’ve also expressed their desire for me to drop by.”

Fred sat down on the bed and George shrugged in a *whatareyougonnado?* kind of way. “You’re a popular fellow, Harry. And you’ve got them all running scared.”

Harry took a deep breath and shook his head, dispelling thoughts of the international community from his mind. “What’s in the trunk?” he asked.

“Ah,” Fred grinned, leaping up and caressing the trunk lid. “The fruit of our labour, young Harry. The first shipment in a long line of future shipments. A load of those massive shield devices you wanted, plus one or two of the more *volatile* devices that we couldn’t resist making straight away.”

Harry nodded – he could feel the pulsating energy of the magical crystals even through the reinforced lid of the trunk. “Such as?”

“Well,” George said, casting a critical eye over the trunk. “Three of the reactors, which we modified a bit.” Harry raised an eyebrow. “Oh yes, Harry, oh yes, oh yes. One of them will now power the British Isles for... well....”

“For how long?” Harry asked. “Don’t leave me hanging guys....”

Fred took over. “One of them now has the capacity to power every home – muggle or otherwise – for...ever, Harry.” He said that matter-of-factly. “The crystal is charged to its maximum, and won’t deplete for roughly four, maybe five, million years. Give or take a millennium. Anyway, we rigged it so the crystal absorbs latent magic in the air and atmosphere – from the ether. It will never run dry, and its output to intake ratio will

always balance.”

“It’s safe as well,” George added. “Won’t explode and melt a continent. The power inside of it is enormous, but encased. And air – oxygen – neutralises it. You following, Harry?”

“I’m impressed,” Harry replied. “So you’re saying – if the core, the crystal, is ever exposed, the power simply dies?”

“That’s what we’re saying. By the time the magical energy is turned into electrical, or even mechanical power, it has left the core, so there’s no worry of it not delivering power, either.”

Harry nodded. He had solved his energy concerns. Although these reactors were just a drop in an ocean compared to the power that rested inside of him – less than a drop even – he couldn’t power the planet twenty four hours a day, and wouldn’t even try. If enough of these were built then he could....

Fred and George were way ahead of him. “We predict, taking into account the different muggle countries and states, that you could power the entire planet on about five hundred of these things.”

“So there are the shields and the reactors in there,” Harry nodded. “Anything else?”

There was a click, and then the room... spit the dummy.

A seeping mess of darkness rained down, like water on glass... or blood, and wiped away Harry’s sight. Everything shook, and he heard something clear and crisp in his ears, as if it were coming from a radio – he heard music.

‘The Highway’s jammed with broken heroes!’

He heard that, something snapped, and he was back in his room at Grimmauld Place. George was speaking and Harry caught the tail end of

what he said.

“—nets, Harry. Just one, but it’ll do the trick for a perimeter about thirty miles wide.”

Harry shook his head and realised that, despite what had just happened, he had never left the room at all. No, the *room had left him*. He looked over his shoulder and out into the reality of this world, into London, and half-expected to see a gaping hole that represented the open door he had explained to Ginny only an hour or so ago.

“I say, old chum,” Fred said. “You look amused, Harry, care to share the joke?”

Harry shrugged. “Broken pieces of other realities are falling into the world, through a gap in our own,” he chuckled, and seeing their blank expressions waved his hand and added, “Trust me, guys, if you’re me, then that is funny. Anyway, what were you saying?”

Fred and George exchanged a look and then pointed at the trunk. “You asked what else was in there, and I said it was the radar nets, as you called them. The things that can detect the Dark Mark and dark magic from a range of thirty miles.”

“Excellent,” Harry said. “Cheers, fellas.”

There was a click... and Harry thought reality had taken a few seconds off again, but it was only the door opening. Ginny came in and smiled when she saw her brothers.

“What are you two up to now?” she asked, hands on her hips. She was dressed in jeans and a white blouse, with her hair tied back in a ponytail. To

Harry she looked radiant, as then sunlight reflected in through the window to play with the dust mites before her.

“My dear sister,” Fred said, in tones of mock hurt. “We were merely

congratulating Harry on having reached his seventeenth birthday.”

George smiled mischievously. “And warning him of the dangers of unprotected—” Ginny took a step forward, her eyes sparking dangerously. George faltered. “Of... er... unprotected country acquisition. He’s been doing that, you know.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and Harry stood, laughing at the antics of the twins. He hoped they never changed, and that, when all of this was done, they had a world to create mischief in.

“Come on, Gin,” Harry said. “Let’s go get a late breakfast. What d’you say to China? I hear the magical government over there is very anxious to see me, but if I can’t even hide from them then I deserve to get caught and – what was it, guys? – hung, drawn and quartered?”

“No, that was the Italians, Harry,” George added, smirking.

Harry exhaled and shrugged. “Ah well, they’ll all be in the same boat soon enough.” He chuckled, making all the sense in the world. Ginny walked across the room and took his hand, and they disappeared silently.

To Fred and George, the room seemed to sigh after Harry had left. And neither could tell whether it was a sigh of relief, or a sigh of regret. Perhaps it had been both – reality was thinning, after all.

“Harry, where are we?” Ginny asked, as they appeared under a warm, bright sun, overlooking a sparkling ocean and dozens of white roofed houses that were built into a hillside cliff, again overlooking the ocean.

“China,” Harry said, looking around and scanning the sky. Obviously checking for threats, as he had done for decades.

“What!? Really! Are you serious?” Ginny exclaimed, her eyes widening.

“No,” Harry replied, and hand in hand they began to walk down the street.
“That was a joke.”

Ginny blinked. “Oh... so where are we?”

“Italy,” Harry chuckled. “I promised you pizza.”

Ginny just shook her head. “You also promised me cake in Paris.”

“Another time,” he replied, regretfully. “Ah, here we go.”

The street they were on was bustling with people – Muggles – coming to and from the market in this town that wasn’t quite a city but well on its way to becoming one. Harry didn’t know where it was in Italy, only that it was on the coast probably south of Rome. He led Ginny across the road and over to a muggle cash dispensing machine.

“What’s this?” Ginny asked, and then read the letters on the screen. “A-T-M.” There were pictures of flags – one was the United Kingdom’s flag.

“This is a muggle cash dispensing machine,” Harry explained. “We can’t just steal a pizza,” he said, as if the very idea offended him. “It’s a lot easier just to steal some money.”

“But... that’s stealing!”

Harry put his hand on the machine and sent his magic into it. A faint glow about his fingers was the only sign that he was doing anything. A moment later, the hatch opened and a thick wad of banknotes spilled out into his hand.

“Money,” Harry said, pocketing the bills, “is very soon going to be worth less than the paper it is printed on. And sunny days like this.... are a dying thing, Gin. We should enjoy it while we can.”

Unable to argue with that, and fearing the implications of it, Ginny pushed all of it from her mind and just decided to enjoy the time she had with Harry.

Tomorrow, he would be back to scouring the globe for weapons and enemies, plotting his plans and doing all he could to save people who wanted him dead and buried.

But that was Harry.

And.... she thought of something then, as smiling he led her towards the ocean and the rows of restaurants along the coastlines. And, perhaps, Harry just isn't fighting for the people of this world. Perhaps, and only perhaps, he was fighting for himself. Because he had been pushed too far... and wanted revenge. Sure, he may save a billion lives – a billion billion – but the war he fought was his own, and the saved lives just a consequence of that.

Considering what he had been through, Ginny was amazed he was still fighting at all.

Looking around at the sparkling summer's day, the happy Italian folk and the beautiful coastal town, Ginny imagined it all roaring with flames under a blackened sky, with tremendous thunder blasts and forks of crimson lightning. It was awful, and all too real – Harry had seen it, Harry knew it was going to happen.

Only Harry had seen it happen on a global scale.... a universal scale. What did he plan to do?

"It's like lunchtime here," Harry said. "Pizza should be top notch. What do you want to drink – I think I'll have a goblet of ale, now that I'm of age. You'll have to stick to the pumpkin juice." He snickered at that and Ginny did to. "We could try the Muggle drinks. I remember drinking this purple... stuff, on a world about thirty years ago. It was pretty good, actually, and I wonder if they have anything like it. There was strawberry taste to it... or maybe not, it was a long time ago."

They had their lunch at a small pizzeria on the foreshore, overlooking the ocean which was studded with white boats and sails almost all the way to the horizon. Lovers walked hand in hand down the boardwalk, as did groups of teenagers and friends.

After the pizza – simply cheese and tomato – Ginny took Harry's hand, wished him a happy birthday again, and wanted to walk along the boardwalk by the ocean as well. It seemed somehow peaceful, and *normal*. There was a lot to be said for the normal, for the mundane, when every day you were looking over your shoulder for that thing that was finally going to kill you.

Harry knew that feeling all too well, and even as he walked hand in hand with Ginny through the crowds of Muggles, along the seaside, he was still scanning the crowd for danger. It was ingrained within him, like breathing – he simply could not not do it.

They turned off the boardwalk and walked out onto the jetty over the water. At the end of it was a street artist, drawing landscapes of the ocean ahead of him. A few small boats were available for hire, with oars, and Harry and Ginny took one. They didn't row that far out into the ocean, but they did go along the jetty, passed the artist, and about one hundred and fifty feet beyond it.

Ginny noticed the beads of sweat on Harry's forehead, and knew his arm must be paining him terribly. The muscles there were always hard and knotted, broken and poorly set from old injuries. Still, he could manage and he turned down her offer to help row. *Stubborn man*, she thought, but not unkindly and with a more than warm smile.

"Here we are in the ocean then," Harry said, gazing at her with unmistakable love in his eyes. She didn't think, since he'd been back, that she had seen such emotion on his face. There had been anguish, of course, but that was a negative feeling.

Ginny gazed at him and then around at the water, which was almost blindingly crystal clear. The water here wasn't that deep, perhaps four or

five metres, and she could see the white-golden sand on the tranquil ocean floor. Dozens of fish, large and small, darted across it and into the few coral clumps dotted around the place. There was no tide and the boat just spun in soft circles, as if anchored.

Ginny reached into the water and flicked a few drops up into Harry's face. He squinted and shook his head, dispelling the drops, before splashing her back.

"This is really nice," Ginny sighed, and slipped off the seat in the small rowboat and sat down against its side. She raised her arms for Harry and he slipped in alongside her. The sun shined down upon them, and it was a bit hot but not uncomfortable.

For a time they just lay together like that, drifting around in circles on the calm surface, arms around one another and comfortable in their silence. Harry found himself falling asleep like that, and Ginny the same – he almost welcomed it, but knew how stupid it was for a man in his position to fall asleep so unprotected. Every dark creature in Creation was his enemy, and it was easy to forget that right then, but that didn't mean something wouldn't suddenly pop into existence and try and kill him.

Ginny saved him, however, by talking gently into the warm air.

"Tell me a story, Harry," she said, whispered, her eyes closed as her head lay in the groove of his shoulder.

Harry smiled. "About what?"

"Anything," she replied. "How about one of your adventures across the universes?"

Harry shrugged. "Most of them don't end happily. In fact, none of them do, but one or two are quite funny, I guess. Parts of them are, anyway. Hang on, let me think...."

There were so many memories in his head, of forgotten years and half

remembered battles and less. They seemed foreign to him now, as if he had watched them instead of lived them. Harry knew he would never forget the pain of living in that other reality for a century, but he was slowly overcoming the horror of it. And he remembered something that, looking back on it now, was funny....

“Did I ever tell you about the time I was almost married to the Empress of Alasnor?” he began. “Alasnor was a world I set foot on some... sixty, sixty five years ago.”

“Married?” Ginny chuckled. “Are you sure you should be telling *me* this story?”

“They were fighting a war, of course,” Harry continued, his eyes glazed over as he remembered. “Against demons from the space between the universes. Allarius, bless him, had spread those monsters across thousands of worlds – and I seemed to always find them. Anyway, I saved the world and was invited to a feast in my honour, in which the Empress herself would dance with me.”

“Dance,” Ginny smiled. “You danced with an empress behind my back?”

“I’m afraid so,” Harry said quietly, and his voice sounded long, stretched, remembering *other* times. “On that world, Gin, when a woman initiates a dance, it’s a marriage ceremony. No priest or no magical bindings – if you’re asked to dance by a woman, and you agree, then you’re married.”

“And when did you discover this....”

Harry laughed. “After the first course but before the second, when the dancing was supposed to begin,” he said. “I was sitting next to this fat lord from some province or county or something. I remember the man had red wine stains in his beard. Anyway, he congratulated me on my future wife.”

Ginny chuckled. Her hand was running slow circles around Harry’s chest, and she smiled when she felt his heart pounding twice as fast as it

should be. "And you," she said, "obviously had no idea what he was on about."

"Not a clue," Harry said, through bouts of laughter. "Then he explained the custom, and I nodded, glanced at the Empress – who, in my humble opinion, was a complete knockout!" Ginny jabbed him in the kidneys, a little hard, and he grunted. "Em... that is to say, I'd sooner marry a demon than her."

"Better," Ginny mumbled.

"I took off almost three seconds later," he finished his tale, with a touch of reminiscence. "Apparated along the scar link almost four thousand miles. I was thankful later on that I didn't miss the way between the worlds with that apparation, and that I wasn't married."

He laughed again, and Ginny laughed along with him. *Such a long time ago, he thought, and just one memory in the book of my life. Look where I am now, and how far I've come....*

And then it happened again. Time clicked and fizzled out, as if on a different reception.

Reality splattered like a drop of paint and the world was whisked away from underneath him as the gap in the world's reality defences, the one that had torn just that morning, enveloped Harry again. The familiar shaking of this black void shook him, and then there was music again.

'He said "Son, can you play me a memory. I'm not really sure how it goes – but it's sad and it's sweet and I knew it complete, when I wore a younger man's clothes.'"

Then it was done and Harry was back in the small boat with Ginny, under a warm sun and with the taste of pizza sauce on his tongue. Reality, as it should be, reasserted itself. Harry tried to forget it, as he knew that less than a second had passed, but it was a significant event.

He felt as if.... *Existence* itself, or perhaps *Reality* itself, was trying to get his attention. Trying to get the Darkslayer's attention. *'Hey,'* it was saying.

'Listen up, kid, and listen up good. I'm dying, and you have to stop that. I can't do it by myself.'

Harry shook his head and pushed these new concerns to the back of his mind. He wondered why he kept hearing the music, and then decided he didn't care. Next thing he knew something would probably be throwing roses at him, but it could wait.

It's my birthday, damn it, all of this crap is on hold until tomorrow, he told himself.

And another, traitorous voice replied, *How do you know that tomorrow will be there?*

You've got a point, Ethan said, throwing in his two cents. *It's your birthday – to hell with it all. To hell, I say!*

Harry pushed everything away and looked down to see Ginny, her face only a hand span of inches away, gazing up at him. There was a sheen on her forehead, perspiration, and her cheeks were a little red from the heat. But she smiled, and she was perfect. A smile told a lot about a person, Harry had always thought, and always would.

"Do you want to dance, Harry?" Ginny asked, laughter in her voice.

Harry did laugh – long and clear. "I do," he replied with a wink.

They stood up slowly in the boat and Harry put his hands in the small of her back, and she draped her arms across his shoulders, falling into his chest.

The boat didn't give them that much of a dance floor, but there was enough room – and stability – for a slow, shuffling, waltz. This was all the dancing

Harry could do anyway.

Gazing out over the ocean, Harry saw the fiery clouds of destruction Ginny had imagined earlier, in his own mind. Saw the apocalypse on the horizon, and held Ginny that much tighter. He loved her, more than anything else, and all the dark powers of this world and beyond were waging a war against that.

That is how Harry saw it, anyway. He had defeated them all once, to get home to Ginny, and now he was fighting again to keep her. Woe to anyone who got in his way....

Harry kissed Ginny then – slowly at first, but then slightly faster as her lips parted and accepted him. It was a long time before he came up for air, and when he did Ginny, without comment, wiped away the single tear that had cut a track down his cheek. It was a tear he thought he no longer had.

Some time later – five minutes, an hour – Harry rowed the boat back into the jetty. He tied it to the anchoring post, the faded, water-stained white wood, and helped Ginny back onto the boardwalk.

She took his arm and Harry had never felt more content at that moment. Just as they were about to move off, a hand came down on Harry's shoulder and he tensed – but this was no fight. None of his enemies would ever give him such a warning.

The hand that came down on his shoulder was stained black with charcoal, and water paints. Harry turned, Ginny on his arm, and regarded the man before him. He was quite old, perhaps in his eighties, and his eyes were squinted against the sun. He had a smudge of the charcoal on his nose, where he had scratched himself obviously, and a warm disposition.

"Scusilo, signore," the man – the street artist – said, and in his hands he held a large sheet of paper, that was nearly as thick as canvas. "Comprate per la signora?" He held up the canvas and smiled uncertainly.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “I speak only English.”

“Ah,” the man slumped, frowned, and then turned the canvas so that Harry could see what he had drawn upon it. “You buy?” he asked.

Harry felt his breath stolen away when he saw what was drawn upon the sheet of canvas. It seemed so life like, so real, and he heard Ginny gasp as well. It was the two of them, of course, embracing upon the boat moments before Harry had kissed her. The lines of the black charcoal seemed to leap out of the page. The pain, and the love, was clear on both of their faces.

Harry took it slowly from the man and looked at it in wonder up and down. Ginny sniffed beside him and then laughed. The artist smiled. “You buy, signore?”

Harry nodded and reached into his pocket for the remainder of the banknotes he had pilfered from the machine earlier. It wasn’t much, considering, but more than the street artist ever expected to get. Harry handed him the entire wad of notes, about four hundred pounds in real money, and thanked him.

The old artist was shocked at the amount, and tried to return a fair portion of it, but Harry was having none of it. “No,” he said, shaking his head, which was recognizable in any language.

Holding the canvas gently, as if it might break, Harry and Ginny walked back into the town and, after a few more hours in the warm Italian sun doing not much of anything, Harry took them home back to Grimmauld Place and into the gathering storm clouds over London.

It was still his birthday, however, so he ignored the growing feeling of disquiet, and unrest, in the reality of his world.

There would be a tomorrow, after all.

Chapter 22 – Defenceless Dreams

*The world / love
The tears / drop
To be part of the wave
Can't stop
Ever wonder if it's all for you?*

~~Chili Peppers

Emotions, Harry knew, were what drove the human race.

Love and Hate – opposites – are the key players in this game. Great things, both right and wrong, have been done for love and hate. Entire wars are fought for love and hate – these emotions are what make us, as a race, alive.

But Harry also knew that emotions could destroy a war – end it. And whilst that may be desirable, it is the way it ends that takes the cake. He'd seen many worlds and nations fall in love and hate – usually to monsters fuelled entirely by the negative emotion, and by evil.

Evil... his old enemy.

All lines of power and all beings of higher thought were turning towards his world, Harry knew, the world he had fought so hard to return to at Twilight. It was the stage, the field, upon which, after an eternity of waiting, the Last War for Creation would be fought.

And there was nothing he could do to stop that... and perhaps nothing he

could do to win it.

Shards of prophecy, half-glimpsed truths, and broken memories were all he had as a guide. He'd save as many as he could, but that meant nothing in the end. For he'd also sacrifice all but those who he loved to end the war. He had the power to do it, the knowledge.

*I've seen the power – and it is something **no one** should have, let alone me.*

Was there a God? Pulling all their strings even now, lying decrepit beyond the Ways of Twilight, beyond *Destiny*. It was possible, Harry supposed, but such a God would be his enemy. Where was free will if he had been nothing but a puppet all his life?

If he ever had been, then he had cut the strings a long, long time ago. God made a mistake of thinking He could control a human – governed by emotion – and forged in freedom. Nothing is more powerful than the human soul on fire – not even the Creator.

But then maybe *control* is the wrong word. Maybe, for lack of a better, the Creator had *faith* in Harry. Whether or not Harry believed he could do it, God Himself did. Belief, after all, gives anything meaning....

Thoughts such as these flowed through Harry's mind almost every minute of every day, and he was tired of it.

Why wasn't there a switch he could flick to make it all go away?

When Harry apparated himself and Ginny back to his bedroom at Grimmauld Place, he instantly fell over and heard several loud popping sounds.

Assuming the worst, of course, Harry's palms flared as he looked around at....

Ginny was giggling.

There were balloons everywhere.

Thousands of them had been crammed into his room, of all colours, shapes and sizes. His apparation had burst a few and he had landed on a couple, which had caused him to fall over. He was trapped in a prison of multicoloured balloons. Ginny was only two feet away and completely hidden in balloons.

The room was almost full to bursting, but there was enough room for Harry to bat a few aside and pick her up. Her grin and laugh were infectious and Harry found himself doing the same.

"This is the twin's mischief," Ginny said, grabbing an armful of balloons and tossing them towards the ceiling. More fell in to replace them and Harry tripped again, landing with a few pops on his bed.

"I really hope the whole house isn't like this," Harry sighed. His heavy metal leg crushed half a dozen balloons as he stood up.

"Let's find out."

Before he left the room, Harry placed the canvas drawing from Italy on his bed and cast a protection charm over it. Things had a way of happening when he didn't want them to – Fate, some called it – so better to be safe than sorry.

It was more of a battle of wills than anything to get to the door. Harry burst at least a hundred balloons with a thin beam of light he conjured, and it made no remarkable difference in the level of balloons. It was then, he realised, that for every one he popped *two* more were taking its place.

Fred and George mischief, most definitely.

Finally, after five minutes, Harry managed to reach the door and force it open. Four hundred odd balloons followed him out into the hallway. Dozens of helium balloons already floated near the ceiling, and streamers were draped like clotheslines from the portraits and walls.

“Happy birthday, Harry,” he mumbled, unable to dodge the streamers and pulling them down around his neck. Ginny was all giggles. “You think this is funny?” he asked, not unkindly.

“Extremely,” Ginny replied. Her cheeks were a little sunburnt from the Italian sun, but her eyes danced with unsuppressed mirth.

They came to the top of the winding staircase, which again was draped with balloons and streamers. Harry set foot on the first step and, before Ginny followed, he felt the magic trap activate and the stairs became instantly smooth – a slide. He lost his footing, cursed quite severely, and began to slide down the stairs.

He created a rift in the balloons that were falling around him and a stream of streamers flew in the air behind him as the stairs led him down and around to the ground floor. Ginny collapsed with laughter and, after a moment, followed him.

Harry spun, shaking his head and knocking a balloon out of the way as the spiral slide arced through the first floor and onto the homestretch to the ground floor. He caught sight of the front door and expected to see, and then crash into, the hallway wall. But it wasn't there – it had been removed to allow smooth sailing into the living room.

Harry reached the ground floor and saw that someone – the twins – had created a dip, and a slight crest at the bottom of the stairs (or slide) and that
at his current speed he was going to go flying up and through the air—

It happened.

He left the slide on the dip and was hurled through the air and through the space where the wall had been into the front room. It was all timed just right as a soft armchair was there to catch him. He landed in a cloud of balloons and then, anticipating Ginny, dived out of the chair as she came hurtling through the air and took his place in the seat.

Chuckling and cursing, Harry looked up from the floor and saw a banner draped above the fireplace.

Happy Birthday, Minister Potter

"I'll kill them," Harry said simply, as two pairs of hands grabbed him under his arms and pulled him to his feet.

"Surprise," Ron said, from his left, as Hermione said, "Happy birthday, Harry. I tried to stop them, I did."

"I didn't," Ron snorted. "Bloody hilarious!"

"Where are they?" Harry asked.

"Wisely hiding," came the reply from across the room. It was Remus. "You seem a little sunburnt, Harry."

Ginny was beaming. "We spent the morning in Italy," she said to the group. "It was... amazing."

Harry met her gaze and smiled. "Do I need to watch out for any other surprises?" he asked Hermione.

She bit her lip and then shook her head, but her eyes told a different story. Ron grinned and put his arm around her shoulders, leading her away before she could burst the surprise bubble.

"Io, Harry," said another long forgotten and yet familiar voice from

across them. "Happy birthday, mate."

Neville Longbottom, Harry recalled the name almost instantly. And on his arm was Luna Lovegood, the spacey but deep thinking blond Ravenclaw.

"Neville," Harry said slowly, and then a kind smile spread across his face. "And Luna. Good to see you alive and well."

"It has been a few months," Neville agreed, walking over and shaking Harry's hands. "We've heard about you in the papers, of course, Minister." Harry glared and Neville laughed.

He turned to Luna and took her hand. "Hello again, Luna."

Luna stared at him for a long moment and her eyes appeared glazed, but they weren't. "Keep on rockin', Darkslayer," she said, surprising them all. Harry almost snatched his hand away. "Happy birthday, Harry Potter." She kissed him first on one cheek and then the other.

CLICK!

Reality folded, took a break, and Harry sighed as he once again heard bits of another reality, one eerily similar to his own. The world was washed away, almost brushed away it seemed, and music was all he knew.

'I never opened myself this way. Life is ours we live it our way. All these words I don't just say. And nothing else matters....'

"Oh," Luna said, as reality shifted back into place. "I wonder what that meant?"

Harry blinked and then smiled bemusedly. "You heard all of that?"

"It is the third time that it has happened today," Luna said, frowning thoughtfully. "It is almost beautiful, isn't it?"

“What are you two talking about?” Ginny asked.

“It’s a glimpse of another reality,” Harry told Luna. “One of the protections that separate realities failed this morning. I think it may have been the one that covered sound, or more specifically music.”

“How odd,” Luna mused. “Do you think it will happen again?”

Harry nodded. “Pray that it doesn’t, though. If the defence that stops... darkness... from crossing into our world fails....”

“Game over,” Luna replied, and Harry laughed.

“Aye, game over.”

Harry had always wondered about Luna Lovegood. She seemed more out of it than the rest of the world, a deep thinker. Perhaps, now he knew more, she was actually more in touch with the world and its emotions than others. Sensitive, somehow, to the workings of creation. It seemed that way... it was the only thing that would explain it.

“Is someone going to explain what that was all about?” Ginny asked again, slightly frustrated.

“I’m honestly not sure,” Harry said, as Luna led Neville away through a balloon strewn floor. “Anyway,” he said, turning to face her. “We have to go find your brothers and blast them into another world.”

Ginny nodded, but sighed. “Is that really fair though?”

“No one knocks the Darkslayer on his arse,” Harry said. “They’ve earned it.”

“Oh, not fair for them – I mean fair for whatever world you send them to.”

Harry paused and sat down on the sofa, pulling Ginny down with him.

“Ah, you’ve got a point there.”

“And you really shouldn’t mess with such things,” Hermione said. “Look what happened last time....”

Harry laughed. “Another excellent point – I’m still cleaning up the mess from the first time.”

“I’m all for the banishment to another world,” Ron added. “Preferably that one we saw in the pensieve – with all the lava and earthquakes.”

The fireplace roared to life a moment later, and a plume of smoke feathered out into the living room as Albus Dumbledore stepped calmly from the floo network, with soot clinging to his beard. His eyes scanned the room quickly, twinkling at the balloons and streamers, but dwindling somewhat as he saw Harry.

“Hello, my boy,” the aging headmaster said, as Harry rose to meet him. “Glad to see you still well. How fairs the leg?”

They shook hands and then Harry lifted the leg of his jeans to reveal the metal limb. “I don’t regret losing it, sir,” Harry said. “The pain is gone – one less ache I don’t have to live with.”

“A shame, none the less,” Dumbledore sighed, patting Harry on the back and leading him back over to the sofa. Harry sat back down next to Ginny, and Dumbledore next to him. “Happy birthday, Harry. Here you are.”

Harry wore a small, almost sad, smile as Dumbledore handed him a bag of chocolate frogs. It had been some time since he had last seen the animated sweets. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it, Harry,” Albus grinned. “I have come to ask you a favour, actually.”

Harry arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Dumbledore glanced around the room, at Ron and Hermione and over Harry's shoulder at Ginny. Neville, Luna and Remus had returned to the kitchen, but Dumbledore glanced in that direction too. He didn't want to be overheard.

"A meeting, Harry. I want you to come to a meeting," the headmaster whispered.

"What meeting?" Harry asked, not attempting to be quiet in the least.

Dumbledore paused and then, with a final look around, cast a silencing charm over the room. "What I'm about to say... cannot leave this room," he then said, his eyes darting over Ron, Hermione and Ginny. "You must promise me, on your magic. Lives, and international stability, depend on it."

"I promise," Ron said, with a shrug.

"Me too," Hermione added.

"Yep," Ginny agreed.

Harry waved his hand. "As do I, Professor. What's this about?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yesterday I was approached by a group of individuals, Harry," he began. "Calling themselves the Believers of Twilight...."

That made Harry sit up a little straighter. That word, twilight, had haunted him for years beyond count, it seemed. "Who are they?" he asked, pushing his bandana further up onto his forehead. It was slightly hot, from the heat emanating from his scar.

"They would not tell me anything of substance, beyond a few names and an offer – to you."

“Sounds like some sort of cloak and dagger cult,” Hermione offered. “What did they want, sir?”

Dumbledore gazed into Harry’s eyes. “They wanted the Darkslayer.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, them and half of creation. Do they want me alive or dead?”

“Most definitely alive, Harry. According to them, you are their messiah. The Saviour, they called you.” Dumbledore shrugged, as if to say make of that what you will.

Harry pondered it for a moment and then laughed again. “I may not have the right to say this – pot calling the kettle black and all of that – but they sound crazy. A bunch of fruit loops.”

“That, I am sorry to say, was my first thought also,” Dumbledore replied, with a tired grin of his own. “However, their membership is quite extraordinary. I myself have been extended an invitation to join.”

Hermione gasped, and her eyes lit up as she recalled some bit of knowledge. “Oh my,” she said. “I’ve read about these people – their order was supposed to be just legend, however.”

“Indeed it was, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said. “And, until yesterday, hearsay and rumour was our only source on the Believers....”

“They’re a secret society, Harry,” Hermione continued, dredging through her memory for all references to this group she could find. “Much like the stonemasons, in the muggle world, only older – far older.”

“Merlin himself was a member,” Dumbledore said. “Our brief conversation yesterday was quite... enlightening.”

“And these days?” Harry asked.

“These days... I was only given a handful of names, Harry, but they are important. The Director of the Wizarding Intelligence Network, both the American and Indian counterparts of that position. The Swedish Minister for Magic, and the heads of several departments within half a dozen other Ministries around the world. Quite a singular list.”

Harry nodded. “And these people, the Believers of Twilight – what do they believe?”

“Why, in Twilight itself, my boy,” Dumbledore replied, casting his mind back through the memories in Harry’s pensieve. “You, of all us, should understand that.”

Harry scowled and stood up, leaning heavily on his metal leg. At times his real leg still felt there, that it still hurt even, and that he could wiggle his toes perhaps. But he couldn’t, and never would again. That piece of him was dead.

“Twilight is not something to believe in,” Harry growled, swiping his hand through the air. “I can’t... I can’t explain it....” Harry paused and turned to look at Ginny. His eyes met hers, but he didn’t really see her – he was looking inwardly, towards himself. “Twilight does not exist,” he said carefully, very carefully. “It doesn’t exist, but... it is infinite in its non-existence.”

“That clears that up,” Ron said dryly.

Harry chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. “Sorry... let me try again. There is reality and there is reality,” he began. “Ah... um... the real world, and the dream world. Twilight is the dream world – it does not exist, save in what we call fiction. Fiction isn’t real, but it does make sense, and that gives it substance.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Dumbledore shook his head.

“I don’t either,” Harry replied. “But Twilight, for what’s it worth, is non-existent. It isn’t real, but it can be touched, in story. It *isn’t* real, and

thus it is all that matters. Do you understand?"

"Not in the least," Ginny replied promptly, and the others equally shook their hands.

"No matter," Harry sighed. "I've had a lifetime to think about this, and I barely grasp it, so don't worry about it."

"It would make for an interesting study," Dumbledore mused, the old teacher in him creeping out. He shook those thoughts away. "However, we must first secure a world in which to study in. Will you meet this society, Harry?"

Harry's eyes flashed. "Make the meeting."

On a higher level of Existence, far removed from the mortal realms and even the Boundary, beings of tremendous power met for the first time in aeons. They were powerful – but not strong.

Their power was in influence, in telepathy and thought. They existed in a place that was built on the foundations of the mortal realms – where power was in strength and raw, defiant will.

Those foundations were fast becoming eroded, and the shockwaves emanating from that level of Existence was destroying the universe of the creatures that had evolved here, in Creation, since the Beginning. It was unravelling the canvas, burning it away after an eternity of strong life.

These beings met – they were of no definitive shape or form – they were thought, or perhaps memory. But they existed, they LIVED, and they did not want their universes to perish. Good and Evil existed here, all in perspective, and waged war here as well.

War was a constant no matter what level of Existence.

It had been since the Fall of the Creator.

These beings met, they spoke beyond understanding, but two life forms in the lower realms were targeted in their speech. One, the Darkslayer, whose legend had reached even the far corners of Eternity. The other was a darker being, that made even these creatures weep. He... It... was more dead than alive. It could not be killed.

A great wave of Evil, pure Evil, was wrapped and warped – twisted – into this being, who called himself the Dark Lord Voldemort.

A decision was reached, a unanimous vote. It was decided that the Darkslayer, a mortal human, could not defeat Evil this time. And he had to be stopped from trying, for if he died, then his power would be unleashed – wild and loose.

That power, running unchecked, would destroy Existence, Creation, faster and more totally than any war.

Harry had not celebrated his birthday in over one hundred years. This was due to the simple fact that, for the last one hundred years, he had not been entirely sure which day it had fallen on. When you were travelling across time and space almost constantly, things like *time* – and the date – seemed less important.

And then he'd changed reality – exploited a loophole in the system and invaded the body of his sixteen year old self. He never left his world at all, and yet he had the memories of doing so. Paradoxical, perhaps, but then what did it matter? It had worked, he was back, and Creation was collapsing once again.

To almost destroy Creation once was bad enough, maybe just unlucky – but to do it again, by saving it and simultaneously recreating Allarius in the form of the Destroyers, that was frickin' hysterical.

Anyway, as of today, July 31st 1997, in his original world – the only one that mattered - Harry once again celebrated his birthday. He didn't really want to, thinking that he could be doing more practical things like saving the universe, but at the same time the other half of his mind told him that he had earned a break after so many battles.

"Harry, my dear boy, a little bird tells us that you threatened to blast our good selves into oblivion and beyond."

The Weasley twins apparated into the living room at Grimmauld Place holding a case of Firewhiskey between them, which they dumped next to the coffee table. Harry, drinking a goblet of butterbeer on the sofa with Ginny and his other friends, arched an eyebrow at the twin.

"By the grace of your sister I changed my mind," Harry grinned. "Be careful, fellas, or you'll end up on my list."

"What list is that, Harry?" Remus asked. A group of adults, namely Order members, were grouped here and there around the room and talking, enjoying the day and having to wade through knee deep balloons.

"The List," Harry replied, levitating a bottle of whiskey from the case into his hand. He twisted the cap off and poured a more than fair share into his butterbeer. "Takes the edge of my shoulder pain," he explained, as Hermione raised her eyebrows towards his goblet. "And might help me sleep a little – it couldn't make me sleep any less!"

"How often are you sleeping?" Remus and Hermione asked simultaneously.

Harry didn't have to think hard about that one. "In the last week," he said, "if you don't count centaur drug trips as sleep, and we don't, then I've had about fifteen hours – give or take an hour."

"That's not enough," Hermione sighed. "You're no good to anyone dead on your feet, Mr. Potter."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Don't think I've not told him that," she said. "You keep this up, Harry, and I'll tell my mum."

Harry stared at her and then smiled. "You wouldn't be that cruel," he stated. "Would you?"

Ginny just smiled, showing her teeth and kicked him in his metal leg.

With that done, Harry swallowed the rest of his butterbeer in one gulp and began to ride down the slippery slope in to blissful drunkenness.

It was five o'clock somewhere.

His small party progressed steadily through the afternoon, and Harry met some old friends and allies in the Order and a few of his old Hogwarts professors. Minerva McGonagall and Hagrid arrived early in the afternoon and Harry spent a few minutes explaining to the half-giant that no, he wasn't planning on destroying the magical community – that he was, in fact, saving it.

At least he thought he was – time might tell a different story.

Doing the rounds of the living room and kitchen, Harry managed to catch Luna alone, sitting in the window box looking out into London and twiddling her thumbs idly. Her eyes, which most of the time seemed far away, now looked at Harry with a certainty he didn't think she possessed.

"The Lord of Twilight," she inclined her head and moved further into the window box so Harry could sit down on the edge and rest his leg. At the joint, where metal became flesh, his nerves burnt and stung.

"Who are you, Luna?" Harry asked, nursing another goblet of butterbeer and whiskey. He swirled it around and stared down into the spinning liquid.

"How do you know the things you know?"

She smiled and a dozen strands of her blond hair fell down around her face. Absently, she tucked them back behind her ear. "I'm one of the few who see you for what you are, Harry," she replied, somewhat cryptically.

"And what is that? The Darkslayer?"

Luna shrugged, pushing her glasses further up onto the bridge of her nose. "The Saviour, The Chosen One, The Boy Who Lived? No, none of them."

"Then what do you see when you look at me?"

"Hope," Luna whispered. "Determination – amongst other admirable traits. I also see your true age, clouded in your eyes. You're over one hundred years old, Harry."

Harry chuckled. "Is it that obvious?"

Luna just smiled and turned away. "For the two months you were missing, Harry," she then said, looking out of the window but seeing further beyond it. "For those two months, I had... *nightmares*."

"Nightmares aren't real... most of the time, and if you're not me," Harry said, draining his goblet again. Around him was the animated conversation of a party and every few seconds another balloon would pop as someone stepped upon it.

"I didn't think they were real, at the time, but I knew they were soon enough," Luna continued. "I saw you... every night, fighting for the most part but also walking, always moving, under a sky of dusty azure."

"Twilight," Harry frowned. He felt more than a passing interest in this conversation now. "Did you dream of twilight, or Twilight, I wonder?"

"Both I think," Luna said, making all the sense in the world to Harry. "I watched you defeat the demons, the Destroyer Allarius, and conquer

Death

himself at the Ways of Twilight. In two months, I dreamt one hundred years of another reality – and I remember nearly it all.”

Was this a piece of the puzzle? Harry wondered. That never finished and always changing puzzle? I hope not....

“You’re the greatest and most feared human in all of Creation. On every world, in every level, beyond the realms of life and death, you are the Darkslayer,” Luna whispered, and in her own voice was a sprinkling of fear. “An avatar for a long dead Creator, perhaps, although I see the idea angers you.”

“It makes me....” Harry smiled. “It makes me *vengeful*. Fear my wrath, Miss Lovegood.”

“I watched you piece your mind back together over decades and I even *heard* you speaking to the soul that is trapped in your mind – to Ethan. How is he, by the way?”

Tired, Ethan said, grumbled, and bored – lonely too. Harry here has more chance of finally getting laid than I do.

“He’s surviving,” Harry told Luna. “His sense of humour has dwindled over the years, however.”

Luna smiled. “I wrote about my dreams in an article of the Quibbler, Harry,” she continued. “Every word the truth – I was dreaming of you fighting in another world, worlds. No one listened, though... except one group of people... who shared similar dreams.”

A few thoughts clicked in Harry’s cold, calculating and more often than not insane mind. They fell into place as he stared at Luna’s warm, and somewhat *pitying*, smile. “You’re a Believer of Twilight,” he said, not making it a question.

“And you are the Saviour,” Luna sighed. “I am sorry for you, just Harry.”

Harry laughed. "Just Harry died a hard death decades ago, Luna. Harry Potter is nothing more than a madman searching for his next kill, or waiting for it to come to him...."

"You *will* win," Luna said, frowning as if that were obvious. "You never lose. Harry," she said, "*Just* Harry, will save the day."

"I'll drink to that," Harry nodded, and went to get another drink.

Later on that evening, Mrs. Weasley wheeled his birthday cake out on an enormous silver trolley. It was a tower of cake, four layers, with pink icing and white butterscotch around the borders. Hundreds and Thousands, sprinkles, dotted it in a fine layer and written in golden icing were the words:

*Happy
Harry*

Birthday

Harry couldn't help but laugh when he saw it, and Ron slapped him on the back and grinned. Adorning the cake, in a circle upon every layer, were one hundred and eighteen candles.

"Very funny," Harry said, and blew them all out by clicking his fingers.

Harry awoke early in the morning on August 1st, having gone to bed at eleven o'clock the previous evening. It was early in the morning, as the clock on the wall told him it was one thirty. He had managed two and a half hours of sleep, and not of the restful kind. He struggled to remember the last night he had had a peaceful dream – and couldn't.

Waking as tired as he was before falling asleep, and slightly hung over as well, Harry showered and changed, shaved half-heartedly and then got on with the plan for that day. Grimmauld Place was silent, fast asleep, and Harry gave London one last look out of his window before

Apparating silently across the face of the planet into a scorching desert sun, eight hours later in the day.

The central desert of Australia was empty – vastly empty. One could get a good grasp of how big infinite was by looking at the seemingly endless outback plains of the Australian bush, which – whilst not being infinite – were *big*. Cracked earth and dying shrubs, poisonous desert creatures and relentless sun the entire year around. Not the kind of place you would expect to find an army base, let alone one of this magnitude.

Harry stood on a small rise looking down at his army. Hundreds of white painted barrack buildings dotted the landscape almost to the horizon – enough to house hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people. Interspersed between them were food halls, weapons buildings, officer's quarters and recreational facilities. Harry saw open areas used for weapon training and, far away to his left, he saw Ministry spellworkers constructing homes for civilians.

Like the soldiers' barracks, these homes were small, compact, but expanded on the inside to house a few hundred people. When the shit hit the fan, and it would, Harry wanted a place for the survivors to flee to, in which he could recruit from them and also ensure the survival of the human race.

The survival of humanity, however, was a secondary consideration. First and foremost the Dark Lord and his armies *must* be defeated, and the magic that allowed travel between worlds eradicated from creation.

That was his one, and only, goal.

In his pocket, Harry carried the trunk the Weasley twins had given to him yesterday morning. The one containing shield devices, dark detectors and other such appliances powered by his light crystals, and designed at the Ways of Twilight. He took it out, enlarged it, and kicked the lid open.

In piles of five were the special devices, and Harry selected one of the large, circular black ones. It looked like a medallion of black steel, about

the size of a manhole cover, and twice as thick. Harry could feel the power emanating from it, from the crystals of fused magic – his magic, and knew that it wouldn't run out of power for a good millennium or two.

He placed it on the ground before him, after digging a rough indentation into the stone ridge with his power so that it was concealed by the environment. Once it was in place, Harry opened the panel on the top of the device and pressed a few of the glowing blue buttons in sequence. The device beeped in response and began to glow.

Satisfied, Harry cast an illusion of rock over the top of the device so that it was invisible to the naked eye, and then cast certain repelling wards and spells over the thing to protect it from sabotage. Before that was done, the device shone with a blinding flash of light and a dome of pure blue magic began to grow out from its centre.

A shield of unimaginable strength – strong enough to even hold back Harry or Voldemort for a few seconds which, Harry knew, could make all the difference in the world in the coming months – began to grow.

The dome continued to grow until it was about the size of a small car, with Harry on the inside of it. It paused then, and Harry hoped the Weasley twins had followed his plans well on this one. A moment later a sphere of white light rose from beneath the illusion of rock and hung suspended in the air in the direct centre of the dome.

“Come on....” Harry breathed. So much life relied on this working.

It did.

The sphere of almost translucent light began to spin and then, to each point of the compass, a band of the pure light shot out for five miles. A giant glowing cross hung in the air above the desert for only a brief moment, and then the dome began to expand along the length of the white beams rapidly.

Ten seconds later and the giant blue shield surrounded the entire

military base, digging itself deep into the earth to prevent access to the facility being breached from underground.

A rare smile crossed Harry's face and he shrunk the trunk down before Apparating across the desert to the centre of the military base. The numbers of his army were still too few for the centre to be overly populated, and Harry was alone as he buried another shield to provide a second layer of defence here. This one he placed under the actual barracks that would house his muggle soldiers, once the war truly began, and wouldn't be found there, he hoped.

This shield was actually better situated inside the base, so Harry made it the primary shield for the base, extending its range a quarter of a mile beyond the first one he planted. It was the first line of defence, and he would make sure it remained strong.

"One more should do the trick," he muttered to himself, under the empty barrack building in the sweltering heat. He was sweating a fair bit, and painfully hung over.

Before leaving this one, Harry keyed it in to his senses by adding a drop of his blood onto the faintly glowing power crystal and whispering a brief incantation. Should anyone or any*thing* attack this shield he would feel it, would know it, and could come to the aid of the growing facility.

Across the base again, directly opposite the ridge where he had planted the first one, Harry planted a final shield, the third line of defence to compensate should the first two be swept away. It would take a great power to wash away the first, however, and Harry only knew of two *people*, besides himself, that could ever be capable of it.

Voldemort, his age old nemesis.

And Allarius, the fool who had tried to defeat the Boy Who Lived.

The shield's blue dome spread out across the desert and the army base and then disappeared like the two before it. To any observer, whether

inside or outside the base, it would appear unshielded and defenceless.

By the time Harry would finish, it would be a lot of things – but defenceless, never.

That done, all that was left to do was to inform the commanders of the base – the Twilight Guardians – that they were now protected to a certain degree, and that more weapons and armaments were on their way, as well as further defences. The twins were working on a few of the lesser weapons that they deemed necessary, and would have them done soon enough once they hired more workers.

He needed to see the Prime Minister as well, but that could wait.

Satisfied that he had done all he could here for now, Harry apparated to his manor on the coast of South Australia and afforded it the same protection shields. His supply soon ran out, and it wasn't yet time to plant some of the other devices yet. He would be moving around a lot for the next few months, and couldn't be everywhere at once. The dark detectors would be more of a nuisance than anything else if they kept going off.

"I'll get the Weasley's to make more shields first," he whispered to himself, to Ethan. "Offer them to Dumbledore at Hogwarts and a few other places...."

It'll be a waste to offer them anywhere else, Harry, Ethan said.

"I know...." Harry sighed. "But I'll sleep easier this way...."

Ethan laughed. *No, you won't.*

"Aye, that's true," Harry laughed as well, listening to the madness in his voice.

Early August *in* *the* *morning*
The *township* *of* *Kinlochleven*
Scotland

The town of Kinlochleven was buried deep in the mountain ranges of Glencoe in Scotland, in a valley aside the Loch Leven. A mining town, it was home to some two thousand non-magical people.

Harry had visited it once, in another world, as nearby the gateway into a pocket of time that concealed Slytherin's Fortress existed in the present.

But tonight Harry was half a world away from Kinlochleven, and he knew not of the murder that was done there in the early hours of the morning, as five thousand of the Dark Lord's Inferi descended upon the town in the silent hours after midnight.

Five thousand Inferi haunted the streets of the town, and screams rent the serenity of the night asunder. Fog, unnatural mist, rolled over the town and buried even the tallest of buildings. Alarms rang out, muggles attempted to flee, nothing could save them in the end.

In time, the Dark Lord's powerful lieutenants, twisted by their master's power, arrived to carry out his bidding.

Five thousand Inperi had entered the town of Kinlochleven, seven thousand left it.

.....

Click.

Harry's world spun away from him and he was left standing in a void of darkness as realities of good and evil, dreams and nightmares, overlapped and plunged the monumental weight of creation into chaos.

Music, he heard, once again – and he wondered if it were of any special significance.

'Scar tissue that I wish you saw. Sarcastic mister know it all. Close your eyes and I'll kiss you 'cause with the birds I'll share, with the birds I'll share, this lonely view.'

A spinning rainbow of spectral colours washed over his sight, and Harry stood alone in the way between reality, the bleeding wound that creation's magic could no longer stem. A wound that terror thrived in, and hope failed in.

There were creatures in the madness, Harry saw, alone as he was. Unseen shapes on the edge of his sight, half-glimpsed truths of the horrors that were growing in the mass of evil that was destroying all barriers on all levels of existence and claiming dominance of the universes.

They would soon reach his world, Harry knew. They were coming for him. Every creature that wanted him to fail, that wanted Existence to continue down the slippery slope it had been set upon – towards Armageddon. They knew that the Darkslayer was their only threat, and that they had a chance to destroy him finally.

Will the weight of Chaos crush reality...? Harry wondered, and then realised he did not overly care. He was doing the best he could, with what knowledge he had. Damn everyone to an eternity of darkness if that wasn't enough.

Click!

Harry, no longer floating in the stream of insanity that reality had become, stood eating a piece of cake in his home in Australia. A late breakfast, a few bites to eat, before he returned to England and his war plans.

Almost as soon as it was over he began to forget this latest vision through the tear in reality. His thoughts jumped to Dumbledore, and how

he was arranging a meeting with the group of individuals calling itself the Believers of Twilight.

This group intrigued Harry, more than anything else was doing at the moment, for they had, for some reason, witnessed his quest across the worlds of a hundred years. Not all of it, but the best bits in horrendous nightmares.

And if their membership was as high class as suggested by Dumbledore, then he may be able to secure a few more magical governments with greater ease than he had the Australian one. America was his next target, it being one of the largest nations on the planet and his greatest opposition.

Soon he would make his move over there, and if he took down the superpower then the rest of the world should slowly begin to fall as well. But conquering nations was only a small part of his plan for this war – the smallest part, even. Prophecy had indicated that there was more for the Darkslayer to do before the end.

A lot more.

And the Darkslayer will be defeated.... He will bring the dead to war.... the Darkslayer commanded the souls of the dead, calling them to fight from the Underworld which was broken without Ra's Light.

That last was from the lines of text Harry had had seared, burnt, into his memory from a book written on the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians. They had
Seen the Darkslayer across time, through reality, over five thousand years ago.

History, magic, and death all had played a part in making Harry into what he was.

"It doesn't matter...." Harry said, almost wailed, and held his aching head. At times like this he wished that he had never challenged Voldemort that

day, March 21st, a century ago. So much would have been different...

And Existence would have fallen without you, Ethan said.

Why me? Harry asked, hoping and dreading an answer.

Because you're Harry Potter, Ethan replied gently, pityingly. *Fate's bitch and Destiny's fool.*

"You always were a comfort, Ethan – always."

Then will you accept some advice from me, old friend?

Harry sat down, and linked his hands together. "Of course...."

In the kitchen of his house, Ethan appeared across the table – he was dressed in the same black billowing robes he had died in over a century ago, and his gaze was as hard as Harry's. They had both lived through a journey of soul wrenching devastation; both were hardened by the atrocities that had thrived in Creation since the Creator disappeared.

If He had ever existed....

"You're dying, Harry," Ethan said, brutally honest. "Anyone that takes a look at you can see that you're on your last legs."

"I've felt a lot worse than I do now," Harry argued.

"You know I'm right."

"I do," Harry conceded. "What's your point?"

"This," Ethan whispered, tapping his fingers on the table and making a noise only he and Harry could hear. "You and I are coming to the end of a long, cruel existence, mate. Your mind is broken beyond repair; your body is falling to pieces...."

Harry snorted. "I got a few limbs left...."

Ethan smiled. "You're sense of humour is already dead," he commented. "And have you seen the fine streaks of grey in your hair? Your body will be as old as your mind before you hit eighteen."

Harry reached up above his ear and yanked a random hair out. It was grey. "Is this conversation supposed to inspire me... or something? If so, you're doing a piss poor job."

"Ginny loves you," Ethan continued. "And that is a rare thing for you... stop wasting your remaining months in war, Harry. That is my advice. Before it destroys us all, learn to truly love her in return."

Harry really paused to think about that. He had lived so long, but had little to no experience with love and companionship – the softer, yet stronger side, of humanity. What made humans human. He was blind to that part of who he was, and more than suspected that that part of him was already dead.

"I... I don't know how," Harry confessed. "All I can offer her is death, Ethan. War and a half crazed miserable bastard who can't sleep, can't die, and can't win this time."

"You don't have to win," Ethan mused. "No one ever said that you have to win!"

"No one has to say it," Harry exclaimed. "If I don't win, then what the hell was the point of creation!?"

"There are more important things," Ethan whispered, stressed, and in his eyes was an urgency for Harry to understand.

It struck Harry then that, although he had spent a century with this man before him, he knew relatively little about him.

"Who are you?" Harry suddenly asked, realising a moment later that he

could not fight Ethan.

"I am who I've always been, Harry," Ethan sighed. "One of the few you trust... don't let your insanity destroy that."

After a long moment, Harry smiled. "You," he said, almost singing, "did not answer my question. But I'll let it slide... I don't really care for your secrets, Mr. Rafe."

"You don't care for much anymore, Harry, and how many will suffer for it I wonder? It is your job to care."

Harry nodded. "My job is to fight wars and slay Dark Lords... demons, Dementors... Destroyers. Most evil things that start with the letter 'D'."

"You need a soul to see it through," Ethan commented. "Ginny can redeem yours, Darkslayer, if you would but let her. *Make* the fucking effort, Harry, for her happiness if not for your own."

Harry's face hardened and he waved his hand before his eyes. "Do not presume to—"

CLICK!

"Ah, goddamn it!" Harry spat, as the canvas upon which his kitchen was painted fell away. He lost sight of Ethan, lost sight of home, and cursed heavily.

'And the Devil jumped up on the hickory stump and said "Boy, let me tell you what. I guess you didn't know it but I'm a fiddle player too. And if you'd care to take a dare I'd make a bet with you. Now you play a pretty good fiddle boy but give the Devil his due. I'd bet a fiddle of gold against your soul because I think I'm better than you."

DUN! DUN! DUN!

'The boy said, "My name's Johnny and it might be a sin, but I'll take your bet you're gonna regret, 'cause I'm the best that's ever been.'"

Harry floated in a viscous fluid that wasn't wet, but resisted his movement. Again he glimpsed nightmares in the darkness – huddled shapes – only this time they didn't disappear. The music continued.

'Johnny, rosin up your bow and play your fiddle hard, 'cause Hell's broke loose in Georgia and the Devil deals the cards. And if you win you get this shiny fiddle made of gold. But if you lose, the Devil gets your soul.'

'The Devil opened up his case and he said, "I'll start this show." And fire flew from his fingertips as he rosined up his bow. And he pulled the bow across the strings and it made an evil hiss. Then a band of demons joined in and it sounded somethin' like this:'

Long nails on rusted metal made Harry flinch and he knew he had begun to spin, but there were no points of reference in the darkness to judge what was happening. The music seemed to be rising to a crescendo.

'When the Devil finished, Johnny said, "Well, you're pretty good, old son, but sit down in that chair right there and let me show you how it's done.'

'Fire on the mountain. Run, boys, run. The Devil's in the House of the Rising Sun. Chicken in the bread pan pickin' out dough. Granny, does your dog bite? No, child, no.'

There was light now – there was that much, and it was more than the sound that usually came through these breaks in the fabric of reality. Ahead of Harry it shone, like a rising sun on the horizon but purple, a deeper azure than twilight and a lot less magnificent.

'The Devil bowed his head because he knew that he'd been beat. And he laid that golden fiddle on the ground at Johnny's feet. Johnny said, "Devil, just come on back if you ever want to try again. 'Cause I told you once, you son of a BITCH, I'm the best that's ever been.'"

Harry laughed – he liked that last verse of the song, which abruptly ended with the last word as the light began to shine stronger, almost blinding. It reminded him of some of the things he had said to Allarius, and that Voldemort was going to learn.

I'm the best that's ever been, Harry thought. *Yes, that's true. Why not?*

There were shapes that fled before the light, shying away from the radiance – however twisted it was, however lacking in divine feeling as oppose to the majesty of twilight. But there were also something in the light, that was the light, and it was approaching Harry fast.

Unsure what to expect, but assuming the worst, Harry pooled his power into glowing fists and this... this *between* reality shook, trembled, under his strength. The air was struck with spasms, vibrations, that rippled outwards like a stone tossed on a still pond.

Harry felt a presence before him, inside of a vague shimmering of air and wasted light, and arched his eyebrow as a comparatively normal voice spoke to him, as if over drinks.

"Welcome, Darkslayer."

Harry blinked. "I was expected?"

"Since the Beginning of Creation...." the voice answered. "You've come here to die, in order to give that which you set on the path to destruction a chance to survive."

In the murky light Harry laughed – of course he laughed. "I think you may have a crossed wire somewhere, mate," he said. "*I*, if I can modestly say it, am the only chance Creation has to survive."

"*You*," the voice said, "are wrong."

Harry paused. "First time for everything I suppose...." he said dryly. "But I really don't think I am. Now, if you'll excuse me...."

"I represent a race of beings that exist on a higher level of existence than you mortals – our universes exist on the foundations created by yours. This war you fight, with little regard, is eroding those foundations."

"Oh no," Harry let the words roll off his tongue. "Shit hitting the fan everywhere – chaos, misery, war, famine, pestilence, death, blah, blah, blah... I find it really hard to care, Mr. Murky-Light."

Harry couldn't be sure, but he thought the voice behind the light sounded afraid, frightened – petrified, even. It was scared of him, and for that reason

Harry didn't destroy this being. He respected the fact that it stood up to him in spite of its fear. Still, if it attacked him....

"A few mortal worlds, a scattering of humanity, are all that remain of your universes!" Rage entered the tone of the voice, washing away the fear. "You let it happen, watched it happen, MADE IT HAPPEN!"

"I'm not denying any of this," Harry shrugged. "What's your point?"

"You must be held accountable for the destruc—"

"Ah," Harry raised his hand and waved his finger back and forth before the murky light. "No, okay, no. Now, my time is short, so you listen and I won't have to destroy you." Harry smirked as the light recoiled, dimmed, and almost disappeared entirely.

"Speak," the voice whispered harshly.

Harry nodded. "I know that I've caused this war, but I did it with the best intentions at heart." He paused and chuckled. "Road to hell and all that, I know, but that doesn't matter. I had to change reality at the Ways of Twilight, for the mortal worlds were collapsing – and if they went...."

"Then everything would have fallen...."

“Yes,” Harry agreed. “I gave Evil, for lack of a better word, a second chance in doing so, and I have taken responsibility for that. I’ve power enough to set this right, I hope.”

“Your enemies are numerous....?” the voice said, making it a question.

Harry grinned. “Then don’t make yourself my enemy. Although I have to say, the odds are long on this one.”

“How can you....?” The voice hissed, spluttered. “How can you jest with something so grave, so great? The continued existence of Creation is hanging in the balance, on the edge of *your* sword, and you are insane.”

Harry winked. “Don’t tell anyone.”

The light shuddered, faded to red, and then almost failed altogether in this space between reality, the tear in the natural order of creation. “We...” it said, hesitating. “We do not want to die, Darkslayer. We do not want it all to come to naught... we are afraid.”

“Then join me,” Harry said, struck by inspiration. He had been working alone for so long that he was surprised when the idea of an ally actually popped into his head. “Fight back against the *enemy*, and not against me.”

The voice sighed. “We cannot exist in your universes, mortal, nor can you in ours.”

Harry nodded, confirming his belief that where he was now was not in any universe, anywhere, but beyond such realities. “Then we have nothing more to say to each other. Have a good one, I’m gonna go back down to Earth now.”

“Fairly soon,” the voice whispered, “your world is going to be the only pillar of strength holding up the rest of Creation, Darkslayer. It will buckle under such weight... you have already lost, doomed us all.”

“Probably,” Harry agreed, “but we’ll go down swingin’”

CLICK!

Time was up for the between-reality, and Harry faded back into his kitchen in the real world. He sat with a pensive look upon his face, brow slanted and fingers tapping the table top before him.

“As I was saying,” Ethan said, and Harry looked up, forgetting for a moment that he was there. “You need Ginny, and she needs you. Ron and Hermione have each other... it’s all connected – make the damn effort, Harry, before it’s too late.”

Harry frowned across the table at Ethan. No time had passed at all whilst he was jarred between reality and something less, something fleeting. Ethan had been frozen from him, locked here in reality, whilst he had been floating amongst the sounds of other worlds and meeting higher beings.

“I’m not the man they think I am at all, Ethan,” Harry said.

Ethan rolled his eyes and a ghost of a smile spread across his lips. “No, you’re a rocketman, you crazy bastard.”

Harry rubbed his tired eyes with the base of his calloused palms and yawned. “How long do you think we have, before the final battle?”

“We’ve been waiting a century for it – and I think now it is finally on the horizon. Time is, at long last, short.”

“That shouldn’t come as a relief, but it does.”

Aye, Ethan agreed, disappearing from Harry’s sight. *Think about what I said....*

“Before it’s too late....” Harry sighed.

Chapter 23 – The Beginning of the End Story

*Heroic? Human? Those are just things people say after the fact.
Why try to give meaning to what the main character chose?*

~~Zidane

*August
A late birthday present*

1st

Lord Voldemort’s footsteps left harsh frost on the concrete walkway in the heart of the city of Manchester. The air around him shimmered, like water, and on some level screamed in wrenching pain as the presence of the Dark Lord threatened to destroy the fabric that it hung upon.

The city centre, at this late hour, was empty. Although it shouldn’t have been – there should have been a few people, magical or not, or a few cars – anything, but it was as if some... deep survival instinct inside of the people of the city had awoken that night, and was warning them clear of the area Voldemort currently occupied.

He was alone – the monster that was once Tom Riddle had little use for his servants anymore. Cannon fodder they would be, alongside the Destroyers and the demons to throw at Potter and finally, after long last, destroy the boy who had fought against him for so long.

“Potter,” Voldemort hissed, and his voice carried well across the silent night. A few streets over a dog whimpered in fear, and everything seemed to fade that much darker.

A star of crimson light jumped between the fingertips on Voldemort's skeletal hand – a pinprick of unnatural light, with enough devastating force to conquer nations, level mountains... reduce a city to its foundations and nothing but ash. Not quite enough power to melt a continent... but liquefying the British Isles was not part of the Dark Lord's plans, at the moment.

No, tonight was only a test – a message for his only worthy adversary – a message written in the blood of a million lives.

A terrible, seething mass of murky brown light surrounded the Dark Lord, obeying his thoughts, and all around him the lights of the muggle city began to flicker out and fail – magic had always had an adverse affect on muggle electronics, and there was no greater magic than this. The spark jumping between Voldemort's bony fingers, rolling across his knuckles, began to hum and vibrate with barely suppressed rage.

It wanted to be used.

A true beginning tonight... Voldemort mused. All of the old rules lay forgotten, as Potter and I play our game with increasing ferocity.

The spark of power trembled and then jumped from Voldemort's hand on his whim, cut through the brown shield of unmatched strength, save in Potter, and – like a twisted flake of snow – swayed to the ground back and forth on the light wind.

Such a small thing to cause so much fear, pain – the sufferings of madness.

The drop of concentrated raw power struck the ground, and Manchester exploded.

Akin to a muggle nuclear device, only that much more devastating, Voldemort stood in the centre of the maelstrom he had created – a sea of fire and bellowing plumes of acrid smoke and harsh, unforgiving

magic. He was laughing as the shockwave spread out in a fifty mile radius, wiping away buildings and life alike.

Rivers nearby in the city and the surrounding countryside were flash boiled, evaporating and leaving parched beds aside flaming, dusty and ash strewn plains of a once thriving urban area. In the space of a single heartbeat, millions of lives were extinguished and a portion of England, in a fifty mile radius, became uninhabitable... forever.

Voldemort laughed.

The earth twisted and heaved beneath his feet and the sky above howled with an unholy wind. His shield was swimming before his sight as it deflected the bursts of flame, the scorching winds and the rain of liquid fire.

A message indeed, Potter – you cannot stop me.

Voldemort, once a man, now something much, much less – and also something more. A God, he thought of himself, and mayhap someone with such power could be seen as a god. Especially if he was immortal... and the power inside the Dark Lord had twisted his soul so that he was immune to such mortal follies as death.

Yes, death was beyond him.

Lord Voldemort lowered his shield with a flick of his wrist, and tendrils of white hot flame ripped through him, searing hot air assaulted him, and blinding flashes of poisonous magical residue seeped into his being. None of it harmed him – none of it could.

From beneath the ground came steam, gushing out in high pressure vents with enough strength to strip flesh from bones, but it did not harm the Dark Lord. Black storm clouds overhead sent down bolts of awesome strength, but Voldemort absorbed them. It was as if the Earth itself was throwing all of the elements against him, in hopes of ridding him from its surface.

Not a chance. There was only one who may be able to do that, and he may only succeed if he destroys the world too. Such power, such beliefs and intents... a terrible battle would follow.

Empty husks were all that remained of some of the buildings on the outer edge of the city, and every pane of glass up to one hundred miles away had been smashed and, in the closer cases, obliterated into dust.

Lord Voldemort laughed, cackled into the heated, wailing air. From his fists green light now shone and he pointed one skeletal finger towards the sky.

“Morsmordre!”

The Dark Mark, something the entire world was learning to fear, flew up into the sky on a ribbon of sparkling green light. A hundred times its normal size, the flaming skull and snake was fused onto the horizon itself, a monumental blight over the burning plains of England. Voldemort mused that even Potter might not be able to remove it, such was his strength whilst casting it.

His work almost done, Voldemort regretted only not hearing the screams of the millions he had sent into the void that night. Moving slowly through the ash and flames, he cleared a patch of the smog and dirt covered sky with a thought and left his message in two hundred foot high letters of purple flame.

Happy Birthday, Harry

Casting a final look at the maelstrom of destruction still rending this part of the world apart, Voldemort smiled and laughed once again – a final time. In all the years the human race had feared Hell, and the Devil, no artist had ever created such an accurate image of the inferno as the one the Dark Lord had that night.

The land groaned with relief as Voldemort disappeared, as it could now die in peace.

Fifty two minutes later

As soon as Harry apparated into the acrid, smoky air shrouding the remains of the city of Manchester he fell to his knees from the unexpected heat and flames. A century of learning how to survive had prepared him for anything however, and no sooner had his knees hit the ground than a shield of crystal blue light sprang into existence around him.

He purified the air in the shield and regained his footing, looking around in growing horror as the howling wind pushed the smoke around, revealing here and there half-glimpses of the chaos and destruction that had been done here so recently.

The most terrifying sight a moment later, however, was Harry Potter himself. His eyes were sparkling dangerously and his jaw, broken a lost number of times, hardened until it seemed every small strand of his stubble stood to attention. He had to unclench his fists, but not before his fingernails had drawn blood in his calloused palms.

A warning, Ethan said, a message.

The smoke cleared overhead for a few seconds and then Harry saw the words wrought in flame hanging in the sky, beyond which the Dark Mark burned ever brighter and mocked him from above.

Harry screamed – roared. Defiance, his will to resist, raged with uncontrollable fury. His anger was like a stone cast into a wasp's nest, worse.

The Darkslayer, beyond tired, raised his hand to the sky. The clouds bowed out before him and the wind cleared his path for him. The

mocking words, the evil mark – unnatural atrocities on the health of the world – would not resist him.

“VOLDEMORT!” Harry screamed. “VOLDEMORT!”

No incantations – no Latin – not anymore and never again. Pure emotion powered the beam of light that rocketed up into the sky and blasted through the words, shattering them into sparks before continuing on to the Dark Mark. When the light struck that, the malevolent creation simply disappeared.

Still in a rage strong enough to pull down the heavens, Harry apparated away – there was nothing more he could do here. He had failed, in a small way, once more.

Failed... and his defences, that staved off the madness he had once been smothered in, were weakening because of it. What would happen to this world, to all worlds, should Harry's rage be truly unleashed....?

August 5th

Following the explosion of a nuclear weapon in the United Kingdom, an emergency session of the United Nations had been called in order to offer aid to the nation that had suffered a spate of terrorist attacks over the last few months, each of increasing ferocity.

The last, on August 1st, had carried none of the characteristics of a conventional weapon of mass destruction, save the destruction it had caused. No one knew what had happened, why it had happened, or who was to blame. Anarchy had gripped the United Kingdom and civil unrest was the least of the government's problems.

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom had been unreachable for the last week, and many had begun to suspect that he had gone into hiding. Which, again, was uncharacteristic of the man who had led the UK these

last few years. The man they knew would be hitting back hard with all the fury of his armed forces.

So the ambassador for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland had little to say at the meeting, for he had no one to report to, had no information on the disaster, but accepted the aid on behalf of his country. It was needed, desperately.

And all over the world the Muggle governments prepared themselves for similar attacks, as their magical counterparts informed them of the terrible truth – that this was an act of war by the Dark Lord Voldemort, and that none of them were safe anymore.

Thoughts of the magical community turned to Harry Potter, the rebellious boy they had all condemned for his acts, but were beginning to realise was their only hope of salvation. Slowly, but surely, they were seeing the light.

It was too late, however, and they could do nothing.

Potter and Voldemort would do whatever they did, and the survivors would be left to pick up the pieces afterwards.

August
The Fate of the Earth

7th

It had taken Harry more than a few days for his rage to subside over the massacre in the north of England. He had disappeared for some time, gone to calm down, and had emerged possessing such a cold calm that it was impossible to tell that he had ever been enraged.

He returned to a world of chaos – the muggles in uproar, the magical folk frightened beyond their wits – and learning that vast scores of people were disappearing from the towns and smaller cities in Scotland. No bodies had been found, but entire townships were empty – completely

deserted.

Harry feared the worst there.

Two days ago he had met with the hierarchy of the Believers of Twilight, the secret society of dreamers who had *seen* him walking across time and space in the quest for the Ways, and who had long held their belief in the Darkslayer a secret from the world, extending invitations to those, like Luna Lovegood, who were more in touch with the world around them than others.

The level of reverence that the men and women of that society showed him annoyed Harry to no end – they treated him like some sort of god, which was a title Harry did not want to claim, *ever*. The leadership of the society was very impressive, as Dumbledore had promised. A few Ministers and directors of the world's intelligence organisations, wealthy individuals and those with vast resources scattered around the globe.

In secret, Finland, Holland and Sweden had all pledged their allegiance in the coming war. Harry knew he had to make some ambassadors for his interests to all his growing allies. Remus Lupin, Dumbledore, and a few others like Tonks and Deras would probably make good ambassadors, but they would have to be let in on more of the plan than anyone else.

Even his closest friends.

That had to change, he knew, and soon. Ron, Hermione... and Ginny, they all had their parts to play, whether for good or ill remained unseen.

The Believers were a cult, of sorts, but one of impressive influence. It would help a lot to already have some factions in the American government supporting him, when he made his bid for control there.

Those were Harry's thoughts as he sat alone, in one of the darkest rooms of his manor house on the southern coast of Australia. Alone that was, save for Ethan – always save Ethan. His conscience that could think for itself....

There was scarcely any light save from the pale torches flickering on the wall, and the glow of the tiny power crystals that scattered the desk before him almost haphazardly. Harry sat at a long workbench and around him wires, pieces of metal – some glowing red hot – were littered with sparse care.

Tools – pliers and tweezers, a hammer and tongs – lay on the bench before him which, in turn, was burnt and scorched in numerous places. The smell of electricity, magic and heat was heavy in the air.

“We’re almost there,” Harry whispered.

One step closer to the edge, Ethan sighed.

A scroll of parchment was unfurled nearby, stained with ink drops and burnt around the edges from the experiments Harry had been doing all day. It was a parchment Harry had only shown to two others, and they had refused to have anything to do with it.

For written upon the parchment was knowledge Harry had gained at the Ways of Twilight, knowledge of tremendous implications.....

Harry was building a bomb.

No, not a bomb. The Final Bomb.

His failsafe device, the last straw, when all the shit had indeed hit the fan and the fan has broken away from the ceiling and crashed into the ground.

“Almost, almost, almost....” he chanted, madness burning his very soul. One could not be sane and create such a thing as what sat before him on the bench.

A small device, small enough to fit in the palm of his hand, and round like a dome – black as the night – and cut open at the top, revealing several

dozen ultra small power crystals, fuelled with enough raw power to end the war utterly. Wiring, copper tubing laced with liquid titanium for extra strength, and a series of small flutes that, when activated, would shake at such frequencies as to unleash a wave of destruction unparalleled in this, or any, universe.

The Final Bomb, Harry called it, and the name was apt. Oh God, was it apt.

Harry had been constructing it for hours now – and he had lost all track of the time. His right leg was numb, cramped, but things were still too unstable for him to move and have a break. Soon, maybe, soon....

He had been proceeding with the utmost care ever since he began, as he was very, very tired. His eyes looked haunted, shrunken back into his skull, and his scarred skin was pale and his hands were prone to bouts of shaking.

And Harry saw the Bomb as something beautiful, whilst respecting its devastating power. What it did... how it did it... would be magnificent, should the time come when all else was lost and he simply had to push the button.

“As deadly as it is beautiful,” he mumbled, slipping another tiny crystal into place and only remembering to breathe after that was done.

It connected life force – that was where the Bomb got its strength.

The frequencies it sent out, fuelled by the power crystals, would tie each and every human being on this planet together with invisible cords, and in that moment – as six billion lives became one, the human race would truly be *one* race upon one planet. Borders and skin colour, religion and belief would be washed away as humanity understood itself.

For one brief moment, in the history of the world, no one would want to harm anyone – could not even conceive of such a thing.

Then the Bomb really got to work, and used the raw energy in each and every one of the life forces it connected – split ever atom in every body in a single instant.

Game over, Ethan smiled.

The explosion would be magnificent, lighting up the heavens for years, and it would annihilate the earth and everything in it.

It would stop the war, but at a cost that was unbearable.

Only, and if he was near death himself, if all was lost... would Harry use it.

“And I would,” he said. “I could push the button without hesitating....”

But how does one know if all is lost...?

What are the signs...?

Some time later, Harry finished his weapon and sealed the fate of his world. It was lighter than he thought it would be, and he slipped it into his pocket without giving it a second glance – having only waited for it to cool. There was no way to test if it was operational, that it would work, but Harry felt that it would.

It was insane enough to work.

August
Grimmauld Place

10th

It had been nearly eleven full days since Harry was last attacked by anything, and he was beginning to feel extremely nervous. Since he had

been back in this world, going on four months, he had been attacked at least once a week by something, and the week leading up to his birthday about every five minutes, but nothing really since the battle he had lost his leg in.

Harry wasn't about to fall into a trap, however, and because he hadn't been attacked, was expecting it all the more. He pitied the next creature, whatever it was, that attacked him – for he was wound up and almost anxious for a fight.

He was sitting in the old kitchen, cradling a cup of tea with his shaking hands that Hermione had just made him. She sat opposite him, picking absently at a salad and searching for a topic of conversation. Ron and Ginny – the entire Weasley clan – were at the Ministry, meeting and greeting the foreign aid ministers.

Harry had arrived at Grimmauld Place about ten minutes ago to find only Hermione and a few members of the Order. Of all his old friends he had met since returning, Harry felt as if he and Hermione had not really *bonded*, as he had to a greater extent with the others.

Ron and Ginny.

This awkward silence was proof enough of that, and he did want to change the situation, if he could.

"How's Creation holding up?" Hermione asked, her eyes alight and a small smile on her lips. "I hear reality collapsed a few days ago...."

Harry smiled sadly. "Just a part of it – nothing overly important. How are you holding up?"

His question seemed to catch her off guard. "I'm... I'm fine, Harry."

"No you're not," he said, staring at her hard. "Spill it, Hermione, what's up?"

Hermione glared at him but couldn't hold his gaze for long. She sighed. "I'm afraid, Harry, okay? I'm terrified... I mean, look where you have brought us! You have answers to life, to the meaning of the universe... but it's all going to be destroyed for reasons I can't understand, no matter how hard I try. I fear not understanding and—"

Harry held up his hand and grinned. "You're rambling on a bit there," he said. "What don't you understand?"

Hermione just shook her head. "Everything... Twilight, the white roses Ginny mentioned – black roses – Good and Evil, Light and Dark, God and the Devil... where is the sense in all that madness?"

Harry knew that Hermione relied perhaps too much on her books, had always done – it was built into her character, a part of who she was and what made her that much more unique in a world of six billion. She hadn't changed whilst he had been gone, not much, not that he could remember anyway.

All of this, everything he had brought back from that other reality, was way out of her depth... it wasn't in any book.

"I don't think it is supposed to make sense," Harry frowned. "I gave up trying to fit the sane into the insane a long time ago, Hermione. But there's no need to be afraid... if it all ends, it ends – we'll cross that bridge when we come to it." For some reason, that made Harry laugh.

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said, "but I can't face this with the same calm indifference you do. I'm so afraid I feel sick."

"Afraid of what you don't understand...." he nodded. "I don't understand it either – not in the least – all I know is that all of this..." He waved his hand around in the air, as if to say reality. "All of this isn't something to fear – ever. It's something to be conquered, overcome, defeated."

"How about something to be appreciated?" Hermione shrugged. "It doesn't all have to be about war. God, if there is a god, didn't make it to

be all bad....”

Harry’s sharp eyes flared with... anger. “You see the mind of the ever-absent Creator now?” he asked, clenching his tea cup a little too hard as it almost buckled under the pressure. His anger faded. “Perhaps you’re right,” he conceded. “And I emphasise *perhaps*. But know this, Hermione, if there is a Creator, out there somewhere... I would not be able to show Him mercy.”

Hermione gasped. “You must have faith, Harry, surely?” she asked. “In more to life after death?”

Harry sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. “I’d like to think there was nothing but blissful forgetfulness after death, Hermione, I really would – but I know better. No, we exist forever in some form – and always will – I have to carry the memory of everything I’ve ever done, the millions I’ve killed, the worlds I’ve burned... forever. Do you think I’m being punished?”

Hermione’s face seemed to fall and she looked at him with such pity that Harry wanted to leave, but he stayed. “*It will never be over, not for you,*” she whispered. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

Harry laughed, with an edge of bitterness. “It is the only thing that has ever remained constant in my life,” he said.

“I don’t think you’re being punished, Harry, not that. You’re doing the best you can for what is *right*, beyond right – what is good.”

“But who decided that I had to do that? The Creator? The Darkslayer was foreseen at the Beginning of Time, Hermione....” Harry’s voice trailed away to almost nothing. “Is this... is this only a test?” he asked, almost desperately. “Is that all life is, because I won’t accept that! I don’t want an afterlife, if we’re judged by what we do in this reality, that is simply wrong.”

“Well, you’d know better than I....” Hermione whispered, more than a

little intimidated by Harry at that moment.

Harry seemed to realise he was coming on a bit strong and fell back, shrinking slightly in his chair and draining his tea cup. "How'd we end up talking about all of this?" he asked softly. "Philosophy... right and wrong... life and death – let's talk about normal things. How are you and Ron?"

Hermione smiled. "We're surviving, Harry, like you. Our relationship is getting rather serious, actually."

Harry arched his eyebrow and smirked until Hermione grinned and rolled her eyes. "I'm happy for you," he said.

"And you and Ginny?" Hermione asked, tapping her chin. "She couldn't stop gushing about that morning you spent in Italy – I think she was worried you weren't human enough to manage it."

"It surprised us both," Harry chuckled, but then that faded away to nothing. "To tell you the truth about Ginny and I... I'm afraid, Hermione, of our relationship."

Hermione frowned and then smiled bemusedly. "You? The Darkslayer afraid of Ginny Weasley?"

"I know!" Harry exclaimed, with forced humour. "If this gets out my reputation will be ruined."

"We can't have that! Tell me what's up, kid?"

Harry stared down at the tabletop in thought, both good and bad, and after a few moments whispered the words that had been haunting him for weeks, "I... I don't think we'll make it, she and I," he said, and a shiver passed through his body. "Maybe... before Twilight, a hundred years ago... four months, whatever, we could have had a chance. But now, now there's too big of a gap that we can't fill, if you follow me. And as reality fails it is only getting bigger.

“I mean, at times there’s a hundred year gap between us, but most of the time I feel seventeen again – as I should – because this body never went through the gateway into other worlds. The memories are clearer of life before all the universe hopping on March 21st. That’s just a small part of it though....”

Hermione nodded, listening and understanding. This was something she could deal with, as the repercussions would probably not shake the foundations of Time and Space.... well, this was Harry, so they might. No matter.

“You’ve been making an effort, haven’t you?” Hermione asked. “Trying to make it work....”

“Some think the effort hasn’t been good enough,” Harry replied, tapping the side of his head.

“How is Ethan?”

Tired, like Harry.

“We’ve been arguing quite a bit,” Harry shrugged. “Not the first time, won’t be the last.”

Hermione nodded and they fell into a not quite comfortable silence, broken only by the wind which was howling through the trees outside. It was a cloudy day, which threatened rain – odd, for summer, but then nothing could be relied upon anymore.

“You do know its Ginny’s birthday tomorrow, don’t you, Harry?” Hermione asked.

Harry blinked and then sighed. He had forgotten – he could scarcely recall what he had had for breakfast, if it had been anything at all – he was just so damn tired. Not all of his scars were physically visible, some ran deep rifts through his tattered soul and mind. Perhaps he would never sleep again....

"I'd forgotten," he said, the weight of it all heavy in his voice. "I'd forgotten...."

"What are we going to do with you...?" Hermione *tsked*. "You have to do something special...."

Harry seemed not to have heard her, as his eyes were glazed over and he had to shake himself awake. "I've missed talking to you, Hermione," he said, distant. "And you're right... you were always right... we do survive." Harry stood up.

"Where are you going then? Ron and Ginny will want to see you, you know."

"Tell them I'm sorry, but I have business to take care of."

"Saving the world?" Hermione asked.

Harry snorted. "God no! Nothing as boring as that. See you later."

He was about to leave but something gave him pause – the fear still present in Hermione's eyes and the way her face had paled in parts of their conversation. There was a strength in Harry that she didn't have, that he was born with and that she would have to earn... He paused and met her eyes.

"Some advice, Hermione, about the world and reality," he began. "Do not be restricted by your knowledge and experience – we're all caught up in the same flow, a few of us are just swimming against it. Abandon logic, and you'll abandon the fear."

August 11th

What was once Manchester still burnt ten days after the destruction, and would be uninhabitable for centuries yet to come – if they came. Nothing and no one could get closer to the city centre than half a mile, and even there one was gambling with one's life.

There seemed to be nightmares in the chaos.

It was a raging, toxic inferno, and it would be the perfect place to bring the demons through into this world, Voldemort knew. They could survive quite happily on this waste land... The Dark Lord had ten thousand of his Inferi wandering the desolate plains already, and more would soon follow – the

United Kingdom would become his beachhead unto which the rest of the world would fall, as he unleashed his legions.

It was early in the morning and Harry was sleeping, dreaming, but not resting, alone on the sofa in the sitting room of his manor house in Australia. He was fully clothed, right down to his steel capped boots and flowing cloak that he had wrapped around himself for warmth the night before.

It had been a long day, yesterday, with meetings to make, people to see, and weapons to deliver. He needed more weapons, and the British Prime Minister couldn't be found – the man had fled, apparently, but Harry suspected foul play. The man Harry had met was not the type to flee. Nothing he could do about it however.

Harry dreamed.

He was sitting in a deck chair on a shining silver beach – a deserted beach with calm, gently crashing waves that made not a sound and seemed so immaterial as not to exist at all.

Perhaps they did and perhaps they didn't.

Harry blinked, the sky faded to twilight, and he was no longer alone. Another chair appeared alongside him and sitting upon it, smoking a cigarette, was a familiar figure from his dreams.

From the centaur drug trip.

“Shit, Potter,” Ralph the pot plant said, “your dreams are seriously fuc—”

“Is this a dream then?”

“It’s a choice,” Ralph coughed and wheezed, tossing his cigarette away. “You like to make choices, don’t you, Harry?”

Harry laughed. “Not through choice, buddy, not through choice.”

“Well, then we’ll take a chance – one in six with my widowmaker here.”

Ralph, somehow, was holding a six-shooter, a long silver revolver with a spinning chamber that was flashing, giving off sparks.

“We’re gonna play a little Russian Roulette, Potter – put the barrel in your mouth and pull the trigger.”

Without hesitating Ralph did so, and the gun clicked once, without any preamble.

The gun was in Harry’s hand. It was a dream, he was sure, but dreams could be real – his dreams could be, anyway.

With that in mind, Harry pointed the gun at the side of his head and pulled the trigger to a dry click. He handed it back to Ralph who did the same, again receiving nothing but a dry click.

“Ho, ho,” Ralph laughed. “A one in three chance of smearing your brains across this picturesque nightmare.”

Harry shrugged, looked straight down the barrel of the gun and pulled

the trigger – then laughed. A novelty flag, sporting the word BANG! in bold red letters shot out of the barrel and hit him in the forehead.

“You’re dead,” Ralph said. “I hope this is not a sign of things to come....”

Harry paused, sighed and turned to gaze out at the sparkling horizon. “Is it wrong to hope it is....?” he whispered.

Harry awoke; at least he thought he did, as he couldn’t tell. The barrier between reality and dreams was merging at that moment, falling together like salt and pepper – both opposites, yet they go well together.

There was music, and he realised he had awoken between reality and nothing, on the edge of the canvas of creation. He yawned – this really got old fast. Standing upon a silver walkway with parallel white lights running up its length, Harry heard the dull thud of wood striking metal in the darkness ahead, over the music.

‘It doesn’t matter who was right, there’s no justice in a dream. Never thought a heart could break without making any sound. Is nothing sacred anymore? Is forever just another word? Is a promise something people used to keep, when love was worth fighting for?’

“Meatloaf, that is,” said an eerily familiar voice in the darkness, emanating from the direction of the wooden thuds.

“Oh... shit,” Harry said, sighed, and then laughed. “Is that you Beelzebub? What’re you doing outside of my head?”

Beelzebub, the little midget of a man, barely thigh high and sporting a long silver beard, appeared on the walkway against the darkness in the background, smiling and his eyes sparkling with the hint of memory.

And he was green – a little green man, carrying a walking stick.

“Dreams are reality, so they are,” Beelzebub said, grinning and frowning – seemingly an impossible thing to do, but his face did it. “Hate and

suffering, this place is.”

“Why are you talking like that?”

Beelzebub raised a silver eyebrow. “See Star Wars, you have not. No matter, it is.”

Harry chuckled, laughed, and wasn’t aware he did so. He threw up his arms and watched as streaks of light seemed to flow out of his fingers and smear across the air. They faded slowly. Reality really was *thin* here.

“Seal the fracture, you must,” Beelzebub continued, stumbling over to Harry and whacking him hard in the shin with his cane. “Your duty, it is.”

Harry didn’t feel any pain in his shin, as it was metal, and this seemed to surprise the little devil, Beelzebub. “Sorry, dude,” Harry grinned. “I’m not the man I used to be.”

“Fuck with a Jedi Master, you will not!” Beelzebub exclaimed, and suddenly a wind howled across the void and Harry felt himself sliding back. “The balance, you must restore. Or die, we all.”

The last came from the little man as a wail, and everything else was lost in a flash of the brightest light.

Harry awoke again, in reality this time, alone on his leather sofa within his manor house. Sunlight streamed in onto his face through the large window that stretched across the eastern wall and he rolled over with a sigh, already flexing his shoulder to work out the stiffness.

Today was August 11th, he knew, Ginny’s birthday. Depending on the time here, it might still be August 10th, just before midnight, in the United Kingdom – at Grimmauld Place, where he had last seen his friends. That gave him at least ten hours to deal with the day’s business before going to see her, and making the effort.

But he was tired. It seemed like only an hour ago he had laid down to rest, and it almost had been. Two hours ago he had fallen asleep here, after a day much like any other – save for the fact that he hadn't been attacked. It was becoming a real concern now, that things were progressing faster than he could manage and that maybe...

Maybe all of your enemies have united, under Voldemort, for a single attack... Ethan mused. If that is the case then you won't be able to save this world, although you may still win the war.

Harry yawned and shook his head to clear it. He needed some coffee – coffee would wake him up. “I won't count it a win if I have to sacrifice that which I fought so hard for before....”

Do you ever wonder what the Guardians are up to?

“Fighting the Destroyers if we're lucky, but we're not, so I'd say they've been wiped out.” Harry rolled his head in circles until his neck cracked satisfyingly. “I could have used them... actually, so that sucks.”

No matter, aye....

“I won't make it a problem,” Harry shrugged. “Just something that would've helped.”

Harry stood up fast, and as he did streaks of colour washed around him in a swirly mess of blue and yellow, black and green – red and silver. He swayed, knocked off balance by the colour and then slowly raised his hand. Streaks of grey trailed after his fingers, like jagged claw marks, through the air.

Harry just shook his head.

He ran his hands in circles and smudged the colour, which smudged the reality beyond it. Harry laughed then, and streams of green colour fell from his mouth. He knew what this was.

Reality had entered the next stage of its destruction. As Harry knew, reality could be likened to a canvas – upon which an artist, the Artist, had painted the world and everything in it. This colour he was seeing now was the paint of that creation, melting and smudging together at his hand.

Harry blinked and the smudges in the air faded, as if they'd never been. An old failsafe built into the matrix of creation, of the reality governing the mortal worlds, had sealed over this fracture against the system, but it was only temporary – there was only so much that could be done, and soon nothing would help.

Harry forgot about it almost immediately as other pressing concerns entered his mind, with Ginny at the forefront. He walked away through, relatively speaking, *clean* reality and went and made some toast.

Hell, for what it's worth

Lord Voldemort stood alone in the inferno of Manchester, the ash covered plains upon which stood husks of buildings, dry river beds and patches of roaring flame that, at times, grew white hot. The Dark Lord revelled in this waste land he had created, as did his Inferi.

He could sense them, wandering the burning plains, in their thousands. Soon to be hundreds of thousands. Millions, in the coming months. One could never have enough servants. Voldemort knew he would need them if he was going to conquer other worlds.

And only one obstacle stood in the way of that goal.

Potter, of course. It was always Potter.

The ground quivered, wept, with Voldemort's anger.

Between his hands a dark storm cloud was brewing, on a small scale now but it would grow. It roared with all the fury of the Dark Lord, reaching up towards the sky like a slithering snake. The storm demon he had conjured so many weeks ago would be a pale shadow against the enormity of this storm.

Voldemort knew now, that no power could match his – or Potter's, save their own. He did not need spells, or enchantments – hexes and curses – he was magic, in its purest, but sadly twisted, form. He and Potter, two halves of a whole, destined to fight to the death.

And to the winner went Creation... what was left of it.

Number Twelve Grimmauld Place held a lot of memories for Harry, those he could remember, and the majority of them were not happy. This was where Dumbledore had insisted Sirius Black, his godfather, remain for almost the entirety of his fifth year – a mistake that cost the man his life.

That was a lifetime ago, but death meant nothing to time, and vice versa. If this life Harry had lived, was living, was just a game – merely a game – of chess, say, then Sirius had been a pawn. One with free will to make the choices he made, but still just a pawn.

Cannon fodder in any game.

Does that make you the King? Or perhaps you're a Knight? Ethan's laughter bounced off the inside of Harry's head. *You were a pawn once, back in time, maybe you still are...?*

"Whether I'm a pawn or a king doesn't matter," Harry sighed. "At the end of the day they're all still playing pieces."

Where are your friends in this game?

“Behind me, but still on the front lines.”

Harry tested the top stair in the house carefully with the tip of his boot before stepping down on to it. He wouldn't put it past the twins to leave their enchantment upon it. It was safe.... yes, it was safe. Harry glided down the stairs.

He found Ginny, Ron, Hermione and a group of Order members all enjoying lunch in the kitchen. Ginny jumped up out of her seat when she saw him and Harry caught her in a quick embrace, whispering happy birthday into her ear before they both squeezed into the same chair.

“How's your day been so far?” he asked, conscious that the Order members, whoever they were for he recognised none, were slowly leaving the room.

“We spent the morning back at the Burrow,” Ginny said, and began to put together a sandwich of ham and mustard for Harry. From the look of him she thought he hadn't been eating and sleeping well the last few days. “Mum's there now, making the twins clean up the mess they made.”

Harry smiled. “Oh?”

“Don't ask,” Hermione shuddered. “It involved a lot of bubbles, foam, and garden gnomes.”

“You had a good morning then? I'm sorry I wasn't there for it....”

Ginny nodded, her face emotionless. “What kept you?”

Harry took a bite of his sandwich and chewed it thoughtfully, not really tasting it. He wasn't that hungry – never was these days, just tired.

“Politics,” he said eventually. “There's a rebellion in the Australian Ministry, an underground movement to overthrow me. I think it's the

Americans,
John Rafter... if I had the time I'd deal with it, but there are more pressing matters."

"Such as?" Hermione asked.

Harry's eyes flashed, powerful – a glimpse of the madness and the steel inside of him that he had tempered down over the decades – and then they faded and died. The sunken pools brought on, wrought into his face by a lack of, inability, to sleep.

"I can't...." Harry said. "I can't put out the fires of Manchester."

"What?"

Harry just shook his head and then held up his hands. They were pale, calloused and burnt. Shaking uncontrollably, his fingers were covered with cuts and scratches.

"I've tried, but there's a... a will, resisting me. It's Voldemort – Voldemort *doesn't* want the flames out and I can't overcome that."

A shudder ran around the table and the room seemed to darken. Perhaps it did darken; such things were possible around Harry. Anything was possible for nothing was impossible. *Nothing!*

"He's... he's stronger than you?" Ron asked, unable to mask the fear in his voice. If Harry couldn't beat him then they were dead – the only real truth.

"I don't know," Harry said, and his voice was clear and calm. He wasn't afraid, anxious or... or anything. "I just couldn't do it – my magic only scarred the ground further."

"Maybe it's because you're tired," Ginny suggested. "Not getting enough sleep."

Can't get enough sleep, Ethan whispered.

Harry thought about that for a moment and then his mind jumped to the next problem, pushing the previous one to the back. "There's something big building up as well." He looked directly into the eyes of all his friends. "Soon – perhaps a few minutes or perhaps a few days – but soon."

"What do you mean big?" Hermione asked, her brow crinkling as Ron draped his arm across her shoulders, unconsciously pulling her closer.

Harry grinned his insane grin and linked his fingers together. "Hand of God type stuff, if you believe in all that crap. Everything's going to change, again, and a lot of people are going to die, again."

"Same old, same old," Ginny sighed. "What are we going to do?"

"Harden ourselves against the storm," Harry replied, and then his face began to fade. It was the closest Harry had come to showing the strain in a long, long time. "I... I fear...."

Ginny held him close, concern once again flashing in her eyes and in her every movement. Whatever could unnerve Harry... he was always so strong, always survived. What could break him....?

Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to take control of the situation, as he had always done and would so long as he drew breath. "This is going to stretch beyond our world soon," he said, calm as ever once again. A ripple of the eleven year old Harry that once lived under the stairs had almost broken to the surface then, but who he was now reasserted itself. "A lot of bad things are about to happen, and whether or not we can or will accept it we are all this poorly written story has for heroes."

"Well..." Ron swallowed audibly. "Thanks for the fair warning, mate."

"What next?" Hermione asked.

Harry raised an eyebrow and then smiled wryly. "Now? Now, now, now..." He stood up and took Ginny's hand. "It's your birthday, Gin. Let's go get some birthday cake in Paris. I seem to recall promising you that once upon a time."

Ginny laughed and spun into his arms. "You were almost unconscious and the white rose you gave me had just blown apart the foyer of the Ministry in Australia."

Harry blinked. "I'd forgotten it was then... but that reminds me." He raised his right hand and flicked it once, twice, three times and it shone briefly, the light fading to reveal three glowing white roses, thornless green storks and dew covered buds that were blossoming to their fullest. "One for each of you...."

Ron and Hermione took them without comment, the confusion and curiosity evident on their faces. Ginny held hers to her nose briefly and looked over at Harry across it.

"These were quite powerful in the Ministry," she said, a hint of a question in her voice. "Especially when mixed with blood...."

"Powerful," Harry agreed with a nod. "But also unpredictable... some of the things I've seen a white rose do. They've stopped wars, ended battles, rained across a field of demons. A storm of them. For all that, I have no idea why they exist or why they do what they do."

"You have any thoughts?" Hermione asked, gazing in wonder at the flower she held.

Harry shook his head, but then looked pensive. "Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, I reckon it may have something to do with opposites. A great truth that everything has an opposite... but I'm not sure."

"It's a mystery then," Ron shrugged.

Harry nodded. "To solve the mystery of the white rose would be to

understand *why* we exist at all, that I believe. And why creation is *worth* saving, worth going to all this trouble for.”

It may even hold the secret to redemption, Ethan mused. *For both of us....*

If we deserve it, Harry replied. *And with what we’re planning I doubt we ever will.*

“Surely it is worth saving anyway,” Hermione said carefully, gauging Harry’s response. “Anything is preferable to total destruction.”

Harry laughed and took Ginny’s hand again, staring down at it as if gripped by an odd thought. Then he looked up, and once again his eyes flashed with barely suppressed rage. Rage he fought against every minute of every day. It was his anger at his role in life, what he had to do, who he had to drag in to it....

“I would prefer total destruction to an existence where Allarius, or Voldemort, assumes the command of Twilight... should that happen, I’ll destroy it myself.”

It was a warm, sunny day in Paris when Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione arrived in the early afternoon, having all apparated here under Harry’s power. It was summer in the Northern Hemisphere, quite a hot one this year, but there was a cool wind blowing in from the north off the channel. An odd wind, for the current climate, but there none the less.

The streets of Paris were busy and clean and the Eiffel Tower rose to its height above the city in the distance, atop of terraced houses and buildings – shops and businesses. Dressed in his black jeans, shirt and cloak, with his headband hiding his always burning scar, Harry attracted more than one or two odd looks.

After Harry ‘borrowed’ some money from the muggle cash machine, they

found a restaurant on the river, overlooking the city and sporting a menu of fine French cuisine – including a wide variety of most excellent cake.

The four friends, and Ethan – not quite a friend, not quite much of anything – spent the next few hours under the warm sun talking about mundane things, and rarely broaching the serious, creation-devastating problems that so plagued them.

Hermione told Harry that they were planning to reopen Hogwarts on September 1st, as they had always done and that Dumbledore wanted to see him about extra security. He made a mental note of that – added it to his list. He didn't have high hopes for the old school, but he'd do his best to see it remained standing with the time he had.

There was talk of the top-secret base all the papers were saying that Harry was constructing in the heart of Australia, and what he planned to do there. Oppose Voldemort, was his answer – and that was true but told them nothing. Harry wanted to tell them more, but couldn't yet. It was just too early, some things still too delicate.

"We understand, Harry," Ginny had said. She wasn't happy with it, but she understood.

And, of course, what birthday lunch could be complete without a cake? Harry ordered a full, rich chocolate cake and conjured some candles for it.

Ginny beamed – she was enjoying the day, which made Harry smile. These days it was a rare thing for him to smile without a glimpse of insanity in his eyes, but seeing Ginny happy did that.

All good things had to come to an end, however, and late afternoon found the four of them walking slowly, Harry and Ginny with their arms linked,

Ron and Hermione the same, along the promenade before the giant metal construct that was the Eiffel Tower. It was a quiet, calm day – almost deceptively so, and it was here before the tower that it was time to leave.

"I wonder if you could drop me off at my home, Harry," Hermione said, and Ron nodded slowly.

Harry recalled that Hermione's parents had insisted on going home a week or two ago – perhaps a month, he couldn't remember – to pack up their belongings into storage. They would abide by Hermione's wishes to stay at the manor house in Australia, but they were not leaving their life behind just the same.

"I'd like to see my parents," Hermione continued. "See how packing is going."

Harry nodded, thinking about something else – what, he forgot a moment later. Probably wasn't important. "Here," he said, and removed one of the unused French banknotes from his pocket. It shone blue for an instant and then faded. "Portkey – double portkey – it'll take you to your home and then to Grimmauld Place afterwards, if you want to go back there. Just tap it with your wand – should work in a loop like that for, well, for as long as the paper lasts."

A feat beyond any normal magical person, and Harry had done it without any real thought. Hermione really thought she should be used to his power by now, but she was not.

"Thank you," she said, taking the note and Ron's hand. With a final goodbye shared between the four friends, whose choices would soon shake the universe, Hermione and Ron disappeared silently, hiding in plain sight from the muggles who failed to notice a thing.

Another gust of cold wind blew in from the north just as they disappeared, and it had an ominous feeling to Harry. His instincts told him something was amiss, that there was trouble. He had learnt to trust those instincts implicitly over the years. Trouble, and heading his way.

Forcing a smile onto his face, which became genuine when Ginny returned it, he grasped her hand and they quickly kissed – nothing grand,

but of love
just the same. It seemed to fit.

And that, the afternoon of August 11th, was the last time that Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione were together as one, this side of death, for some time.

Rage Awoken

After Paris, Harry and Ginny apparated to the twilight evening on the southern coast of Australia, and spent the remaining hour or so of light strolling hand in hand down the beach, as small waves crashed gently and the tide rushed up against their ankles.

They sat in the sand and kissed, a little more lustfully than usual, but Harry wasn't complaining. In all of his long years he had never been this close to anyone, and the fact that it was Ginny – whom he had fought Fate and Destiny for – made his heart race. In those moments, when their tongues danced, he could almost believe that things would turn out for the best.

They laughed together and, with unspoken consent, their hands dared into previously untouched territory across their bodies – gently, curiously, with great care. The light was failing fast as twilight descended into full night and as the stars began to appear, one by one, Harry and Ginny walked back up to the house – both a little flushed but... eager... to continue their previous explorations.

Now, a lot of factors had hardened Harry into who he was. The Darkslayer, the Last Hero, Lord of Twilight... and so on, but love had never been one of them. He had lost everyone he had ever cared about once, almost twice, and had to do some pretty damn distasteful things to stay alive.

But not anymore, for he had love now – one life, Ginny, in all the

countless life across creation, she loved him. An emotional connection stronger than hate, anger, pain... death.

They went to bed together.

Slowly now, carefully, as neither had any experience in this area, they started with a kiss. Both of their hearts were racing, Harry's skin was tingling and he was sure all of his hair was standing on end from the nerves he was feeling. That made him laugh, and Ginny did too. Of all the things he had done.... this was making him the most nervous.

"I love you," they whispered, one after the other. Ginny, surprised by her own boldness, began to gently unbutton Harry's shirt to reveal his chest. He shivered as her fingers ran across the old scars and one or two burns. She kissed his neck and he returned the favour.

There was a point, Harry knew, where there would be no turning back. He felt it inside of himself and was sure Ginny did as well, if the look in her eyes was anything to go by. But neither wanted to stop – they wanted to love.

Harry felt something then – something that wasn't love – and he could have wept.

He had undone a few of the buttons on Ginny's blouse, revealing a glimpse of the pale skin beneath, and she was quite calmly undoing the button on his jeans, when his stomach wrenched so hard that he was almost sick.

"No...." he whispered, and Ginny glanced up sharply.

"No....?" she said, rejection in her eyes. "You don't want...."

Harry screamed as his scar exploded. Blood sprayed forth from it like a fountain and splattered across Ginny's face. She screamed as Harry rolled beneath her and she almost fell off the bed. Confused, scared, Ginny held her hands to her ears as an unholy screeching filled the room

and the drapes on the bed, and the curtains, erupted into flame.

Harry's Darkslayer sense, that sensed evil – the Destroyers and the demons, tore at him painfully and Voldemort's laughter echoed in his mind – it was coming out of his own mouth as well, but he didn't hear that.

She's mine, Potter, a voice in his head said and Harry laughed again.

The room was on fire, somewhere across the face of the world a gateway into the Boundary had been opened and Voldemort was now exerting all of his will against him, his power, to incapacitate him.

He wouldn't allow it – couldn't allow it.

Ginny screamed and tried to hold Harry down as he tossed and turned. His face was smeared with blood, as were the sheets and an arc of it had splattered against the headboard and wall, too. She had to get him out of here, as the bed frame was quickly burning under the unnatural flames, as was the far wall – the heat was extraordinary, but there was no smoke.

The screaming, which reminded Ginny of Dementors, stopped then but Harry continued to writhe. A great slashing sound filled the air and Ginny turned to the source of it, her scream of terror caught in her throat as she saw the space above the floor and before the door tear open as if with a scythe and dark light pour into the room from some terrifying source.

Then Ginny was truly afraid, for there were nightmares in that abomination of a gateway.

Tendrils of dark light, shining black, shot out of the void and latched themselves onto Harry's arms. Ginny was thrown aside, onto the floor, and a tentacle of the same substance wrapped itself around her ankle and began to pull her towards the hissing gateway of darkness. She struggled to grasp onto anything, but it was hopeless.

Harry's flesh burnt as the tendrils of dark light wrapped around his chest and arms, and his metal leg. He pulled against them, he could hear Ginny screaming, and it was that more than anything else that gave him the strength to blast through the evil that was seeping in the room.

"Out... of my... head...." he moaned, and forced Voldemort's presence from his mind with thoughts of Ginny, of loving Ginny. Something the Dark Lord detested and could not abide. Power he knew not.

All at once Harry's vision cleared and he saw flames enveloping the ceiling, burning flames that were smokeless. Ginny screamed again, and Harry turned to behold the gateway in his room. He roared when he saw it, saw the thing dragging Ginny through it, and without another thought leapt from the bed – cut and burnt – clawing desperately across the floor towards her.

"HARRY!" she screamed, and in her eyes was fear.

In Harry's eyes was determination, and anger. He hurled himself across the floor, which was burning now, and flung his arm forward towards Ginny's outstretched fingers. He fell short by less than half an inch.

His eyes did widen in fear then and he cried, "NO!" a moment before she was sucked into the gateway, itself writhed in flame. Harry stood up in a heartbeat and ran at the hole in space, but it was closing. He leapt, knowing he was too late, and fell through nothing but air, hitting the door hard and splintering it against his back. Dazed, Harry swore and a cold fury descended upon him.

So cold... that the temperature in the room dropped to below zero, and the flames burning everything spluttered and died. He clenched his fists, biting back the fear for Ginny's life, and then apparated across the planet to Scotland.

He was going after her, of course, and there was only one place she could be.

He wasn't wearing any shoes, his shirt was a tattered ruin from the flames and his eyes were wide and large with fury. His face was smeared with blood from the scar and it gave him a crazed, insane, almost suicidal look. Heads were about to roll.

It was raining in Scotland, in the mountain range of Glencoe. Heavily, unnaturally – this storm had been conjured by Voldemort; he sensed the Dark Lord's taint immediately. Red lightning rippled across striated, black streaked clouds that rumbled with thunder and rain.

And he didn't sense any life at all, for dozens of miles in any direction – but there were dark creatures, dark creatures in their thousands. Inferi, he sensed, having fought them before and knowing their evil – scattered all across the countryside.

Don't die for her, Ethan said, in a voice surprisingly unlike his usual calm tones. *Just remember what you're trying to save....*

Harry ignored him – didn't ever hear him.

He was at Kinlochleven – the mining town that bordered the Loch Leven, and upon which – on the side of the nearby mountain – Slytherin Fortress existed one thousand years in the past, buried in a time bubble but accessible from a portal stone on the other side of the Loch, which was turbulent, unruly – high waves from the gale force winds crashing against the shore.

Harry sensed that magic now, at work on the side of the mountain. Already his clothes hung to his body from the rain and all the blood had been washed away – a steady trickle still ran down from his scar, however, but it was washed clean almost as soon as it appeared.

"I'm coming, you bastards," Harry whispered, utterly alone save for his enemies at that moment. There were dark shadows ahead in the sheets of rain, and Harry knew that the walking dead had felt his life, and were coming for it. He had no time for such trivialities.

His palms blazed with the power of eternity, of Twilight, and he grasped at the air – scarcely aware of what he was doing, he sought out the fold in reality that hid the fortress away and found it straight away.

Harry pulled and the air groaned as he untwisted the magic Salazar Slytherin had wrought a millennium ago. It didn't take much, and with a sound alike that of shattering glass, Slytherin Fortress was brought into the present, growing harshly out of the mountainside as a black spike.

It was here, Harry knew, that Ginny had died once before. Not his Ginny, a Ginny of another world, but one he had not been able to save all the same.

There was green light on the roof, above the parapets, upon the cut-off platform that he had killed a weaker Voldemort upon, and where he and Ethan had been merged into one as the Killing Curse, mixed with raw strength, split his soul from his body and imprisoned it in Harry. Voldemort was up there, Harry knew, as were old friends.

And Ginny – she had to be. They would know he was here, as well. He had not been overly subtle in wrenching the fortress a thousand years into the future.

Harry apparated up there without a second thought.

And so began... the greatest test of his life.

[Chapter 24 – Hell Hath No Fury....](#)

What would happen to this world, to all worlds, should Harry's rage be truly unleashed....?

~~Soul, Chapter 23

Harry apparated on to the cold marble stone atop of the mighty Slytherin Fortress. Rain lashed against the parapets but not on the wide ledge he stood upon, as a dome of invisible power deflected the fury of the elements away. From the ground he had seen swirling green light up here, and now he could see its source.

Ginny hung suspended in the air, her eyes large and fearful. Her arms were limp, stretched out either side of her as if she were stuck to an invisible cross. In Harry's mind an image from a long lost world, a plain of burning crosses simmering with the remains of thousands, tormented him. He took a step forward and then paused, suddenly very cautious.

He and Ginny were alone on the roof – there was no one here, or was there? Harry couldn't sense anything living, but then the creatures he fought sometimes weren't alive anyway. He took another step forward and the green light flared once again.

Floating around Ginny, small spheres of dark green light ran in circles about her head and under her arms, through her legs and around her feet. Small spheres of arcing light that, Harry knew, were death. They spun faster and faster around her, small balls of death – the Avada Kedavra – but none of them touched her, not a single one... why?

Thunder loosened the heavens and lightning tore across the clouds. The dome keeping the rain out flashed red as the lightning struck at it, again and again. Whatever magic created it was obviously a conductor for the electricity of the storm.

Harry took another step forward, and the green curses spinning around Ginny moved an inch closer to her, and spun ever faster. He growled and clenched his fists as the thunder boomed.

"Any closer and she dies," an all too familiar voice hissed, echoing off of the dome walls and reverberating through the dark marble of the floor. "If you touch your magic, Potter, the curses will kill her."

Harry was furious – ready to tear down the universe. Ginny was speaking, he saw, but he couldn't hear her. She was inside a shield of

her own, only this shield wasn't for protection. No, not protection... Her face was smeared with his blood, he saw, from only a few minutes ago in Australia, and the streaks of her tears had cut lines down through the crimson....

Harry didn't move – nor did he touch his magic. He concentrated on the spells and charms around Ginny and saw that, yes, they would be activated by proximity and *anyone* using magic on the roof. He couldn't even apparate away now – not that he would and leave her.

"Show yourself," Harry whispered, moving his eyes – only his eyes, left to right. In the shadows of the parapets and the great arching marble pillars there were monsters from another world. "Who am I going to kill tonight?"

The air Harry was breathing grew so cold that he was sure ice coated his lungs. He didn't shiver, he was too enraged to shiver, but his bones ached against the cold. A darker shadow solidified in the darkness under the far pillar and two flame red eyes burnt with nothing but hate towards Harry.

"There you are," Harry growled, and his knuckles cracked as he clenched his fists. His fingernails dug furrows into his palms, drawing blood.

In the other shadows on the edges of the roof more forms began to grow and twist, seeping into the world from a thinner layer of reality. Destroyers, Harry guessed, recently brought into the world. Not the billions he was expecting, not yet, but around a dozen.

The iron doors into the fortress were flung open behind Harry and he looked over his shoulder to see two dozen Death Eaters, wands drawn, a few with faintly glowing red eyes, step up and take aim.

They are all dead, Harry decided.

You cannot die, Ethan said. *Not when everything remains so unfinished... the story doesn't end here....*

Harry shook his head. *What makes you think I won't survive this, as I survived everything else?*

Ethan hesitated, and then said, *Love blinds you....*

I know my responsibility to Existence, Ethan – or whoever you really are, I have my doubts – but Ginny comes first... always.

We will see....

“No tricks, Potter,” Voldemort said, stepping out of the shadows and bringing that dark light with him. “No magic, no friends, no hope – no escape this time. You cannot harm me without killing her.”

Harry simply stared indifferently at the Dark Lord, his eyes unblinking and as hard as the marble he was standing upon. He didn’t say a word.

“So much comes to waste – you mortals waste what time you have,” Voldemort continued, and he was quite insane now. A different, more destructive insanity than the one Harry tried so hard to keep at bay. “You had potential, once, Potter, but you kept your mortality and now nothing but death can come of it.”

Harry nodded. That he agreed with. “Yes,” he said, and his voice was cold and neutral. “Death will come of it....”

The creatures, Destroyers, had stepped into the faintly glowing light that shone from the curses circling Ginny, and they were pale, thin monsters with yellow eyes that shone at Harry with anger beyond measure. These things had once been, in some way, Allarius – Evil – in another form and now they had multiplied, into another form – an opposite of Good. Which was nowhere to be found these days... save for those who saw it in Harry, even if he didn’t see it himself.

“We are great enemies, you and I, Harry,” Voldemort hissed, his eyes flaring as he flung his arms toward the sky. The forks of lightning became a blanket and everything was crimson for a few moments. “We are both of equal strength, opposites – equals, no less. No matter how much has changed; it always comes back to the Prophecy, does it not?”

Harry remained silent.

“I know of Twilight, Potter, and I know of the power that dwells there, beyond Destiny. It shall be mine, I am the rightful ruler of Creation

now....”

Harry’s shoulders shook and a few moments later peals of laughter rang from his mouth. “You’re just like all the other madmen, Voldemort, all of them. I think I’ve told you that before... no matter. Creation will end before I let you assume the throne of Twilight!”

Voldemort’s slow smile put Harry on his guard. His mind was racing, looking for a way out. He couldn’t use magic, he couldn’t take a step closer to Ginny – and he *would not* leave her. But what could he do... He was laughing again, but at himself. The power of a god at his fingertips, a century of hardened war time experience and now, with such a simple trick, he was checkmated.

He wouldn’t let Voldemort see that, however – it wasn’t over until it was over.

“You, my old enemy, will not have a choice. Kneel!”

Harry’s palms were itching – he wanted nothing more than to hurl the strength inside of him at Voldemort, but to do so would doom Ginny. He was stuck, with no way out save one – and that would kill the woman he loved.

Death isn’t the end, Ethan whispered. It is just the next step... but you can’t die yet, Harry, so she has to...

“On to your knees, Potter, or she dies now!” Voldemort hissed, flinging his cloak aside to reveal a crimson scimitar, a curved sword bent like the dark crescent moon.

Swallowing slowly, eyes darting from left to right, and a bead of sweat cutting down through the blood on his forehead, through his wet hair, Harry got down onto his knees. Ginny’s eyes widened as he did and she shook her head, mouthing words – shouting words – he could not hear.

If you die do you think Voldemort will just let her go!? Ethan exclaimed, and he was a storm of anger to rival the one raging overhead. There is a lesser of two evils here, Potter, you know what you have to do... look at her.

Against everything he had ever believed, Harry did look up then – into Ginny's eyes, and what he saw there destroyed what was left of his soul. Her eyes sparkled with dew drop tears but they were calm, accepting. She didn't want him dead, and she knew what that meant for her... what it meant for *everyone* if he did die.

Voldemort stood over Harry, his blade held high and aiming for his exposed neck. "And so it ends, Potter," he said, almost gently. "I will remember you as my only worthy enemy."

The Destroyers' eyes glowed with anticipation and they couldn't help but move left to right on their feet, excited and murmurs of sound rushed up in their throats. The Death Eaters behind Harry were silent, wands at the ready.

Harry Potter did not hear a word Voldemort was saying, his eyes were locked with Ginny's and a silent battle waged between the two, one that Harry knew he was losing. Ethan was screaming in his mind, almost hysterically, telling him to fight – to let her go, that death is only the beginning.

How would he know....? Harry wondered on the edge of his mind. *He has never truly died....*

Despair, then, more than anything else welled up inside Harry almost to the point that he was willing to take his own life. But he was stronger than that – that was the easy way out, and Harry had never done anything that was easy. Everything in his life was a battle – a constant never-ending struggle to survive, to be.

No! NO! NOOOO!

DO

IT!

NOOOOOOOO!

*FOR LIFE, FOR CREATION, POTTER! AND YES, EVEN FOR LOVE!
FIGHT!*

He couldn't cry – not now, not ever again.

Lightning flashed off the curved steel of Voldemort's blade and Harry looked up with a furious scowl and caught the last flash of the crimson light in his eyes before screaming, roaring, his defiance as the blade cut through the air.

At moments like this in Harry's life, time always seemed to slow... to come to a stop, even. And now, as he made the hardest choice in his life – not for himself, not for Ginny, but for Creation and everything in it – Harry saw many things before the end.

Ginny was all of them.

Her eyes were still painfully calm, telling him what choice to make and she was speaking, words he *could* understand as the spheres of energy, of death, spun around her ever faster.

I love you....

"And I you...." Harry whispered.

Ginny smiled....

Harry smiled....

....And then he summoned his twin swords – the blades of Godric Gryffindor from two worlds. It was magic that called those swords into existence, and it was Harry's magic – Harry's act – that killed Ginny.

The blinding flash of green light that struck Ginny killed her instantly, and that light was only countered a moment later by the flash of blue and red that erupted in a shower of sparks when Harry and Voldemort locked blades. The tip of Voldemort's sword had reached Harry, and was cutting into his neck about half an inch before he offered resistance with his own blades.

Harry was still screaming – had been for some time, he realised. And all at once his swords flared to life with blue fire as he knew what he had done... to survive. On the edge of his sight and mind he saw Ginny's lifeless form slump to the ground, heard the beginnings of curses from

the Death Eaters and saw magic – what passed for magic – begin to swirl around the Destroyers.

“RRRRRAAAAAAAAAA!” Harry screamed, his eyes wild and fresh blood bleeding down his neck. He parried Voldemort’s blade, the power in his swords shattered the crimson steel and the fragments were reduced to less than dust.

Voldemort’s eyes widened and he stumbled back, reaching for his own power.

Harry would not allow it. He lunged forward, pulling back with his left arm and, as Voldemort had once done to him, Harry thrust his burning blade *into* the Dark Lord, through his chest and out of his back.

Voldemort screamed – it seemed he could still feel pain.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

Streaks of light were converging on Harry from all directions; other bars of power from the Destroyers that were designed to kill fell towards him – shot towards him with all the speed of their hate. And their hate had melted worlds.

Harry stood up, on shaking knees, and screamed again. He was quite mad, insane with rage and *furious* beyond rationality. He roared again, screamed and roared and bellowed with all the power of the universe. A wave of that power lashed around him and the Destroyers fell to the ground, holding their heads in a pain beyond endurance. Harry bared his teeth and a beam of his white power cut through the Death Eaters behind him, gutting them all.

He was still holding the hilt of the gem-encrusted sword that pierced Voldemort. Harry thrust him back with it into the marble wall, swinging his other sword around in his hand with a century of experience. He was, after all, the greatest swordsman in history.

He intended to drive it through the Dark Lord’s face, into his brain, but Voldemort was not powerless. A disc of magic before his pale and skeletal face sprung alive and deflected the sword. The backlash sent Harry spinning backwards. He cracked one rib against the ground, two,

and a third as he fell down next to Ginny.

He still had a hold of *one* sword, the other impaled Voldemort against the wall, and no longer caring what happened this night Harry put that sword away, hoping the other would end the Dark Lord's terrible existence. It wasn't a very logical thought, but then all of Harry's common sense was overridden at that moment.

He finally stopped screaming and turned to look at Ginny, just two feet away on his left. She was looking at him, still smiling, but her eyes looked *through* him. She was dead....

He had made his choice.

You did the right thing, Ethan whispered, as the foundations of the fortress began to shake. Harry's raw emotion was bringing the vile blight on the world down. *It was hard, but she has gone with her fate now... you will meet her again, beyond that.*

"I... killed you," Harry said, and frowned. He began to laugh – long and loud peals of laughter that cracked the marble pillars. The dome of magic keeping out the storm shattered and sheets of rain washed across the stone parapets. Everything was lost to sight, but Harry had a hold on Ginny's cold and clammy hand.

For lack of anything else to do, save die and doom it all, Harry apparated the both of them away.

Across the roof, Voldemort still stood impaled against the wall. A look of deep shock was on his face as he stared at the blade protruding from his chest, and at the dark, almost black, blood that hissed and sizzled in the rain and had stained the length of the sword. He waved his hand and the rain stopped falling, once again prevented from reaching the roof by a shield.

Potter was gone, he saw, and all of his servants dead or dying. The Destroyers were melting into the shadows and his Death Eaters were all gutted. The girl, the Weasley, had vanished as well – presumably taken by his enemy.

With a snarl Voldemort gripped the silver handle of the sword and

wrenched himself free of the wall. He gasped as he pulled out the spike, and knew that he was not as immortal as he thought. Potter could kill him, and would have had he not just lost his love.

“And your soul, boy,” Voldemort hissed, a cold smile darkening his face as the wound in his chest knitted itself together. There was a scar, a reminder. “We are, have always been, equals. I wonder who will make Creation tremble the more, before we are done?”

Voldemort held the sword that had skewered him and a dark smoke began to wreath itself around the blade. He had not expected Potter to be able to sacrifice the girl in order to survive. The Potter he knew of only a few months ago wouldn't have had the courage to do what had to be done... but that Potter was dead, destroyed by the spell the Dark Lord had cast on the 21st of March....

Voldemort's eyes glared at the sword he held, the Dark Sword. No longer Potter's, but his now, and the next time he met his enemy he would make sure that only one of them walked away... alive.

I'm getting tired, Harry thought, absently, and forgot he thought it a moment later. *I killed Ginny... again.*

You made a choice to save Creation, Harry, Ethan said, not unkindly. *No one can fault you there.*

“I'm cursed,” he decided, staring out over the ocean and the gathering storm clouds on the horizon. He did not know where he was, but it was somewhere. His apparation from the fortress had left him kneeling in the sand on some deserted beach. “I must be cursed... everything I touch turns to dust... fades to black....”

With a damp cloth soaked in sea water Harry gently washed *his* blood from Ginny's face. Her eyes still stared at him and she still smiled. Her hair was tangled, matted also with his blood and he combed it out as best he could with his cut and calloused fingers.

Thunder once again rumbled on the edge of the growing storm – a storm that was forming on Harry's emotions – and the dark clouds were

blotting out the fading twilight. It would be a storm of such magnitude never before seen in this part of the world, and never to be seen again.

Of all the worlds he had walked, the lives he had ended or saved, the battles fought and won – lost – nothing had ever been so hard or driven him so close to the edge as this. No, not close to the edge – sent him careening off it in a blaze of fiery insanity.

“What... what do I do now....?” he asked. “Why can’t I cry?”

Bury her, Ethan whispered. And move on – there’s still a war that needs its leader.

Harry closed his eyes and bit his lip, fighting back the anger – that was until he realised that he didn’t want to fight it anymore. Lightning tore open the sky and the stars were lost to sight beneath thick black clouds.

“I don’t have it in me to fight anymore, Ethan Rafe,” Harry said. “The only anger I have now is for myself.”

Ginny... she wanted you to live, to continue the good fight! Will her death be in vain, Potter?

“You push too far, old friend,” Harry growled, and then carefully closed Ginny’s eyes with his fingertips. She was already so cold... lifeless.

And yet... there was warmth emanating from her chest, a small tingle and a faint glow.

Frowning, Harry reached under her collar and his hand fell on something. He carefully removed it, as Ginny had pinned it to her shirt. It was a white rose, and it seemed to be glowing.

Harry’s eyes hardened at the sight of it. Nothing – nothing but pain and suffering had come from his meddling in the powers of creation. White roses... black roses... they all led to death and ripped away any happiness he had ever allowed himself.

With a roar, Harry set the rose alight and tossed it aside. He ignored the screams he heard in his head as the flower died. Whether they were real or just his imagination didn’t matter – as reality failed and existence

wasted away things he imagined had a habit of becoming real.

"I want to cry...." Harry whispered, his voice carried away on the wind. "But I can't. Ginny is dead... and I killed her."

It didn't seem real, but it was. Too real.

I can't go on without her, he decided. For all my power, and strength and beliefs... we're all doomed now, because I killed her.

And many more will die, as they have always done, should you not go on, Darkslayer, Ethan replied. His voice was cool, even harsh. Everyone will die! Ron and Hermione....

"What's the point?" Harry wondered aloud. "Why should I live anymore? Let them have Creation to squabble and fight over... there is only pain left here for me now."

And if you quit, then they win. Ginevra would be ashamed of you.

Harry let out a long and slow breath. "Do not speak to me anymore, Rafe," he finally said. "I'm searching for reasons to stay alive, and you're not helping...."

Before he knew anything else, or wanted to, Harry was screaming wildly into the air. Oh yes, he had been pushed over the edge, and the fall was into a chasm of darkness so deep that he would never reach the bottom.

When Harry apparated Ginny back to Grimmauld Place he wasn't sure how much time had passed since he had... saved his own life... only that it could have been minutes, or hours – days or weeks. It felt like years, the time on that deserted beach... every second stretched eternal to prolong his grief, his agony. The latter of which he knew he had earned a thousand times over.

It was dusk, or twilight, and only an hour had passed since he stabbed Voldemort, lost his sword and lost Ginny. He supposed his sanity and soul had been bargained away as well, so he could survive. Ah well, it wasn't the first time he had lost that, but maybe it would be the last.

In the fireplace great orange flames roared and licked at the walls, and it was on the carpet before that blaze that Harry appeared, with Ginny in his arms – lifeless. He laid her down before him and stared into the flickering flames, seeing the burning of his own mind within them. He didn't know if there was anyone here, couldn't move to find out, and dreaded what was going to happen next.

"There'll be tears," he said, and mayhap he was speaking to Ginny. "But they won't be mine... I can't even give you that."

This wasn't supposed to happen, Ethan whispered, and Harry wondered if he was speaking to himself or to him.

He didn't care about Ethan though, not really. It was just a thought to distract him from the pain... but then, he didn't deserve to forget the pain. Not now – not ever.

She was a finger on the Hand of God, Ethan continued. *Her role couldn't have been to die... prophecy said that—*

"Blast your prophecy!" Harry hissed, shaking his head from left to right and hitting himself hard in the forehead. "Just... just... forget... there's no justice anymore, if there ever was. And God! Your God, Ethan, is my enemy. Now and forever – I have no mercy left now."

And that's true, Harry realised, as he looked back over these last few months. He had been too soft on his enemies. They had attacked him constantly, sometimes several times a day, and he had always been on the defensive. He had only attacked once – a foreign Ministry, and that had gained him little power. His enemies had grown impossibly powerful, whilst he had wasted time trying to save too much.

Ginny was dead because he hadn't taken the fight to Voldemort earlier. Perhaps this world would have been destroyed, but there were other worlds – infinite worlds – that he and his friends could have gone too. Identical worlds, even.

You wouldn't have won a fight against the Dark Lord, against Evil, Ethan said, *had you attacked earlier. You lost your leg, and got off lucky considering. No, it isn't yet time.*

“Harry!” a gruff Irish voice spoke from across the room, jerking Harry out of his thoughts. “Potter, it is you! What’s the....”

Dermas Trask, his beard covering the scars on his cheeks, moved around the sofa – having just come from the kitchen – and got a good look at the fireplace and what lay before it. He fell silent as he came to a stop behind Harry, but a low, sad sigh escaped his lips anyhow.

It was a long silence, neither having anything to say – and one trying very hard not to give in – but Dermas finally found his voice.

“Her... her mother’s in the kitchen,” he said. “Shit....” He remembered a few months ago when Ginny had run back to face the Dark Lord because Harry was in trouble. It had been moments before he disappeared for two months, and having witnessed some of that fight, Dermas had felt hope that one day Voldemort may be defeated.

Now though... he could almost feel the anguish inside of Harry Potter, and knew the hope of the world was falling to pieces....

Blood from the gash in his neck had dribbled across his scarred shoulder and down his arm and was now staining the carpet. Harry didn’t know it, but he was panting quite heavily – and every time he took a breath a sharp stab of pain rocked his chest. He had broken a rib or two up on Slytherin Fortress. His hands were shaking again, they hadn’t stopped shaking, and he wanted to sleep and forget it all.

But sleep was beyond him, always beyond him. He would die awake, he knew.

“So vast this... this life,” Harry mumbled, not making much sense even to himself. He clenched his bloody fist and a faint glow whisked up his arm before disappearing. “Death... leads to dark places.”

Everything seemed to be fading now... Harry looked up and the flames, which had been the thickest orange a moment ago, were pale and almost transparent. He frowned, looking left to right and over his shoulder. The room was fading, or his eyes were failing. He saw shadows and little else... there were other people in the room now, and on the edge of his mind he heard screams of shock and grief.

But that was gone. A shroud of darkness, a drip of the paint of reality that was melting away, covered Harry in his own anger and regret, wrapped him up with nothing but his memories... and they were dark memories.

Trapped inside a nightmare with nothing but his memories... it would have been merciful to kill him. Yes, it would have. But mercy didn't exist anymore – reality was crumbling, and always the innocent suffered first, last....

“What is the worth of anything I do....?” Harry said, or thought – he wasn't himself, wasn't alive or dead or anything. He didn't know what he was, but he still existed. “When I can love her, and kill her, for what?”

No answer, of course. It was foolish to expect one.

“I... can't fight anymore,” he said, lowering his head into the shadow. “I *won't* fight anymore.”

You will....

“Get out of my head!”

It is who you are, what you were born for.

“No!”

She's dead, life isn't fair, but Fate continues to play out. You may not love the world anymore, Potter, but Ginny did. Fight for what she wanted, if nothing else. That's why you sealed her death atop of the fortress – so you could save everything else!

“What... what do I do now?” Harry despaired of the coming weeks, months and years. He would be alone in a world of enemies. Death... would be the easy way out.

This shroud of darkness, always threatening to undo him, was dispelled with a thought and the reality he lived in shifted back into place. It was not a happy place, as he found himself still kneeling and bleeding before Ginny.

There were others now – Weasleys and close Order members. Mrs Weasley was sobbing in the armchair, her head in her hands and a look

of the deepest grief chiselled into her face. Ron and Hermione had arrived, both in tears and in each other's arms. Silent tears rolled down Remus Lupin's face, as he stood next to Dermal a few feet away.

Only the cries of the grieving could be heard – no one spoke, no one dared to. They had all watched Harry a moment ago as he faded in and out of existence, almost as if he were apparating. But they all knew it wasn't apparation they had seen... it was something beyond this world.

Tonks sat nearby, pale and with red, puffy eyes. She gazed at Harry and just shook her head. Of all the blows that could have been dealt him, this was by far the worst... were they all doomed now?

In the background Remus and Dermal had taken a few steps back, both glanced at each other occasionally as if looking for support, or maybe something to do. Everyone was crying, save Harry, and it was at times like this when people were truly helpless. When all they had was the pain that wouldn't go away.

A broken heart... perhaps it would be better if death was the result of a broken heart. No... no, no, no....

"Jesus Christ...." Trask whispered, to Remus. They were both looking at Harry. "What the hell is he going to do now?"

For once, Harry was acutely aware of the world around him. He saw and felt the emotion of everyone in the room, and was envious of the tears they could cry. Time was passing, he knew, as it should – but it was just seconds on a clock to him now. Living, or whatever his life could be called, would be a cold place from now on.

I can't do it, he thought.

"Harry... what happened?" Molly Weasley whispered, sobbing all the while. "You... Ginny...." She broke down again and fell out of the seat to grasp her daughter's cold and pale hand. "Oh, Ginny."

You have to do it, Ethan replied.

"Why?" Harry asked aloud, not noticing the strange looks he was attracting.

Because you are Harry Potter.

“Creation’s biggest joke,” Harry added bitterly, and pulled at his hair. The blood had hardened into a crust around the wound on his neck, but the movement tore it open again.

“Harry!” Hermione cried. “Tell us what happened?”

Harry heard that, heard the anguish and the pain in her voice and let his hands fall to his side. He looked down at Ginny, he could do that much, and spoke. “I killed her,” he said, his voice hard and emotionless. “I wasn’t... good enough, and it cost Ginny her life. It should have been me... I can’t live without her, so nothing will survive.”

Harry began to laugh, and around him rose a sharp, electric smell. Insanity, some thought, and anger.

Suddenly Harry cut his laughter off with a growl and his eyes blazed in the flames of the fireplace. A wave of cold air rushed from him and the flames died, but Harry reached for the holster strapped to the top of his boot under his jeans, and removed the modified weapon he kept there. A pistol, charged with a power crystal.

He looked down at the weapon, silent now – everyone was silent. As if seeing it for the first time, Harry turned the gun over in his hands and a slow, calm, almost peaceful smile spread across his face. All those who saw it, especially Ron and Hermione, were suddenly very afraid.

“Voldemort’s won,” Harry said. “I quit now... at the end. This farce was just a test, always just a test.” He laughed, long and low, but then his face drained of life and he gripped the pistol firmly. “Fuck it, let the world fight its own battles. I don’t care anymore.”

With that said, Harry raised his arm and placed the barrel of the gun against the side of his head. Everyone in the room, almost everyone, was too shocked to react as Harry pulled the trigger.

Ron tackled him, growling and with anger to rival Harry’s. His weight coming down on top of Harry pushed the gun out of the way just as it went off, sending a sphere of white light shooting through the window, shattering it and setting the curtains alight. Ron came down on top of

Harry and pulled the gun from his best friend's hand.

"Don't you dare," he growled, baring his teeth.

Harry offered no fight, just lay slack under Ron, who tossed the gun aside with a look of deep loathing. All the life had left his eyes, all the fight. He didn't care what happened next, only hoped it was death.

"You coward," Ron raged, grabbing Harry's bloody collar and, in a surprising display of strength, wrenched Harry up and threw him into the nearby armchair. Shocked gasps, overcome by shocked silence, held all the others in the room paralysed. "Whatever happened to choosing between what is right, and what is easy? Huh?"

Harry wasn't even looking at Ron. He wasn't blinking, he lay slumped in the chair and his eyes were staring at something far away beyond any of their sight.

Ron's face was red with anger, wet with tears, and he was shaking so badly that he felt sick to his stomach. "If you quit now, Harry, then they win. And we are all dead!"

Hermione nodded furiously, her bushy hair shaking up and down. "What's happened to your defiance, Harry? Where's the man who stopped the demons from ravaging existence? The one who said 'no more', when all was being washed away and fought back!"

Harry looked up slowly, and shrugged. "I fought for her," he said, his eyes flickering to Ginny. "I thought I... I thought I could still fight, even if she was gone – she wanted me to do it... ah, God, I hate living... but I can't fight anymore."

"Why?" Remus asked quietly, but he was heard in every corner of the room.

"Because I'd be no less devastating than Voldemort if I did," Harry said, and his voice was cold – like an automation. "I've crossed the point of safe return – been right to the edge countless times... Damn it! I never wanted the power – not once!"

At the end there it seemed that he wasn't talking to anyone that those in

the room could see. And the way he threw up his arms, as if fighting off unseen demons, only added to the worry of everyone in the room.

“Then what do you do now?” Hermione asked, managing some small control over her tears and sobs. She was shaking though, they all were – stunned and shocked – grief and pain were powerful feelings.

Harry seemed surprised at the question – he was. He began to shake his head before saying anything but then stopped, a confused frown rippling across his brow as his eyes dropped to the floor and slowly, almost against his will, worked their way across to Ginny.

Harry smiled again, for life had returned. Purpose, even, and it was what *he* wanted to do, not what creation demanded of him. The beginnings of an idea swam in his mind, against Ethan’s suggestions, and this idea would crush even such matters as fate and destiny.

In contrast to his cold, insane and brutally terrifying smile of a few minutes ago, this one gave back some of the hope that had been shattered to those who saw it. Harry fell back down, knelt down, next to Ginny and aside Mrs. Weasley. He moved his hand over her face carefully, slowly, and did not touch her.

“What...?” began Mrs. Weasley.

Harry shook his head, asking her to be silent. He was tired, angry, at the end of his rope. Tired though did not even begin to cover it... a walking husk, a chronic insomniac. What he wouldn’t give for a long night’s sleep – just one. No matter – there were, are, more important things.

A white liquid, like the glowing strings of memory in a pensieve, spilled from Harry’s palm and onto Ginny’s face. Harry concentrated, flicking his wrist in subtle movements that were all important and meant nothing, really, to the dead. The white light grew, spread across Ginny’s entire body – following the grooves in her clothing and the hairs on her skin.

Soon Ginny was lost to sight beneath the rising, glowing dome of light. And then Harry paused, removing his hand which was smoking ever so slightly. A bead of sweat fell down his forehead and he raised his hand to his face. Staring at those red raw fingers, Harry seemed to be arguing

with himself and then twisted his hand.

A white rose appeared and he turned away from it, gritting his teeth and breathing hard, before forcing himself to look at it. Harry dropped it onto the white dome encasing Ginny and watched, as if it were water, the flower sink into the still magic and disappear.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and only Mrs. Weasley heard him.

Harry wasn't just a warrior, a fighter, a damned soul – he was that and so much more. His voice seemed to echo with power and command as he lay over Ginny's too still body. No, Harry was much more than a man. He was powerful, he was a King. A great being on a quest for Creation, breaking any rules and old laws that stood in his way.

He was shaking the foundations of heaven itself, causing shockwaves to reverberate to the farthest flung corners of the shambles that was Existence. That was who he was – his role in life.

And all in the room felt that as he stood up, as proud as any king. The burden he carried was visible though, as he stood with a small hunch in his back. A weight heavier than the tallest mountain, and about as easy to shift.

"Preservation charms and spells," he said, motioning to the white dome that now hid Ginny from sight. "I... have a plan," he continued, with a wry, also sad, smile. "They're very powerful words those, aren't they? I have a plan...." He shook his head. "Anyway, I don't know what's going to happen anymore, so watch out you lot – I'll be back."

Harry turned and Hermione jumped forward to catch his arm before he apparated away. "Where are you going?" she asked.

Harry didn't turn around, but he leant forward and rested his arm against the wall above the fireplace. A wave of dizziness, probably due to blood loss and fatigue, had just washed over him.

"I'm going to get her back," he whispered, and there was dead silence in the room at *that*.

Ron was the first to find his voice, as Hermione took careful steps back,

staring at Harry with a wariness of hope and disbelief in her eyes.

“No spell can bring someone back from the dead, Harry,” Ron said, shaking his head.

Harry nodded his agreement. “Aye, but I’m not using any spell or charm for this.”

“Then what?” Dermas Trask asked, stepping forward with a hand on his sword hilt.

Harry conjured a piece of parchment and a pre-inked quill. Quickly he began to scribble across the page, writing fast – he was eager to be away. Five minutes later and he handed the parchment to Ron, still thinking on Dermas’s question.

“I’m putting you in command while I’m away,” Harry told his best friend. “With Hermione, of course. What I’ve just written is what needs to be done – please see to it. I may be gone for some time, or none at all... I don’t know, just hope it isn’t another century....”

Hermione gasped. “You’re leaving again, after Ginny,” she hissed, shaking her head. “But where – there isn’t a world of the dead you can go to while you’re still alive, Harry.”

Harry pressed his palm against the side of his neck over the gash there and healed it as best he could with his sparse knowledge of healing charms.

You can’t do this, Ethan said. You’d have to kill yourself....

Would I? Harry wondered. Would I...?

Harry shook his head. “No,” he said, “there isn’t a world of the dead, Hermione. But there is a place we all go when we die... and I have a suspicion there’s a... door, yes, door’s the right word. A door I can use to get there....”

“Of course there’s a door,” Remus said, stepping into the flickering light cast by the white dome over Ginny. “It opens when we die. Harry, what you’re suggesting just... isn’t possible.”

"Nothing's impossible," Harry replied. "Sirius told me that, on the bridge between life and death over one hundred years ago. I think he knew that I'd have to live this long life... I didn't remember those words at the time, but I do now and I know them to be true. At this stage of the game, Remus, all bets are off."

"Even death?" Mrs. Weasley asked tearfully, holding a handkerchief under her nose and gazing at Harry with what was unmistakably hope.

"Death was never a sure bet anyway," Harry replied, placing a hand on her shoulder and smiling. "Stay strong, all of you. Ron, please tell Dumbledore... when you see him, that I made the choice that was right, not easy. It may seem like I'm abandoning you now... but... you'll be alright."

Ron stared for a moment and then nodded, holding the parchment of instructions tightly between his fists. "I'm not sure I'm ready to lead in your stead though," he said, and Harry saw his hands were shaking. "There are more experienced... better trained leaders than me."

Harry shook his head. "Fate... or maybe someone else... selected you as a key player in the game, my friend. One of the main five... Hermione and yourself, Ron, will make the choices that are best, even if others don't see it." Here Harry sighed, his face falling into that shape of tiredness beyond tiredness. "You're part of it, to the end. I'm sorry."

"Would you like some company on the road?" Trask asked, again touching the hilt of his sword. "I hear it can get lonely out there."

Harry shook his head. "I want you here, Dermas, for you're part of it as well. Training your friends in the Liberty Foundation for war... no matter what any of you think," His gaze swept over all in the room, even those silent and frightened looking members of the Order. "No matter what you think, all the final moves in this godforsaken war will be played out in the next few months. I don't have the time to explain the scope of this battle, but it has been going on longer than you know."

Since the beginning of time....

"Much longer," Harry looked inward and shook his head. "And we're

fighting for more than just our freedom, for our world. A lot more... but you'll do fine, I know you will."

"And why is that?" Tonks asked, with a sad smile. She believed Harry, but she wanted to know why.

"Because our race – humanity," Harry said. "We always go that extra mile when our backs are up against the wall, as they are now. Just trust me, folks, a lot of the enemies out there are going to regret bringing the fight to our level. You will make them regret it!"

With that, Harry spun on his heel and knelt down a final time next to the dome Ginny was placed in. "See you soon," he whispered, and then faded away to nothing.

*Department
Ministry of Magic*

of

Mysteries

"It may be madness," Harry said, walking slowly but surely down a long, familiar stone corridor that had once seen a battle where five kids outwitted some of the Dark Lord's most loyal servants. "But if it is madness, then so be it."

Think of the cost if you are wrong! Ethan exclaimed, almost bouncing off the walls in Harry's head. *You dead, existence defenceless... it will be a swift defeat without you.*

"I'm willing to take that chance... you should be too."

I'm not a fool to gamble with all of creation for a lost love, Potter. You have a responsibility to—

"To Ginny, to myself. I'm doing what is right, as I see it, Ethan – to save the fucking day."

But this is wrong!

"Is it?" Harry mused, as he entered the infamous veil room that had so haunted his dreams and was an icon of his past. A blight on his mind, the place where Sirius Black had died. "Is it wrong? I don't think so, and for

some reason it became my choices that alter time and existence. For some reason I was selected to do all of this crap, and if I'm wrong, then we all die. But not to make the choice would be far worse, I think."

You can't die, Ethan stressed. *You can't! You may not care for Creation but—*

"I care, damn it," Harry snapped. "If I didn't then I would have given up a long time ago. We're just playing by my rules now, nothing more and nothing less. If whoever chose me for this task doesn't like it – God, maybe – then He can come on down and say so. But then we both know that He's not going to do a damn thing, don't we, Ethan?"

Maybe He's done all He can.... Ethan's voice was less than a whisper. Harry felt, more than heard, what he said.

"Well it wasn't enough," Harry said, with a sense of finality. "It takes more than faith to change the world, Rafe, it takes a lot more."

If you just want to change it for the better, then faith is enough.

The veil fluttered softly in the breeze that didn't exist, and faint whispers from the beyond entered Harry's mind as he stepped up onto the dais that held the silver curtain. He draped his fingers across the tattered silky material and shivered.

Long had Harry held his suspicions about this stone structure and the veil. Long had he had a feeling he knew what it really was. And now, as he stood once more in its presence, he knew he was right. A small smile, of satisfaction, appeared and then faded from his face.

"It's a door," he said.

In his long life Harry had crossed through many gateways between worlds – thousands of them, tens of thousands. He had closed many, opened some, and always followed the scar link that ran through the Ways of Twilight – always. It had burnt holes in the fabric that separated worlds. But there were natural gateways....

Doors built into the very fabric of existence that were meant to be there. They were rare, exceedingly so, but they did exist. And this veil was a

special type of door – it led to a special world, the last world. It led to the Land of the Dead, beyond the realms of life.

And as far as Harry knew it was a one way trip.

Maybe you can find a way back, Ethan mused, to himself. Harry couldn't hear him. *It wouldn't be the first time you've surprised me, Darkslayer.*

Death... it had long taunted him, threatened him, but never taken him. Harry recalled his brief encounter with Death himself, in the field of white roses before the Ways of Twilight. He rubbed his chest where the scythe of the Reaper had pierced him, as he was struck by the pain now.

"We can move from life to death with perilous ease...." Harry whispered. "Why shouldn't it work the other way?"

Some things are just meant to be final, Ethan said. *Right or wrong this isn't a thing you should be doing, Harry. I think you know that, and it scares you.*

"But I'm gonna do it anyway, partner," Harry grinned. "And you're wrong, you know. It doesn't scare me. No, I'm not afraid. Anxious, maybe, but not afraid."

Ethan sighed. *God speed, Harry.*

Nothing and no one saw the passage of Life's greatest hero, of the Darkslayer – Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived – as he stepped into and beyond the veil of death.

[Chapter 25 – Rise of the Heroes](#)

War is cruelty, and none can make it gentle.

~~Parker

Hogwarts
August 12th

During the summer break, the Hogwarts grounds were tranquil and quiet, the only real noise coming from the forest or from the bubbling of the lake. The castle stood empty for the most part, but at night a light could be seen shining softly in the window of the Headmaster's study.

It was a warm summer day, and out on the grounds Hagrid and Ron Weasley tended to his Thestrals, making sure the herd was ready for the job of pulling the carriages on September 1st. Despite all that had happened recently in the war, and with You Know Who, the school planned to reopen as usual.

Dumbledore stood with Hagrid and Ron, both admiring the skeletal beasts and talking quietly, as old friends are wont to do. Ron felt a little out of place conversing with Dumbledore on matters of war, but the old man respected the position of power Harry had given him last night...

Last night....

With Ron's permission, Dumbledore had extracted the memory from his mind and watched what had happened in the pensieve. He grieved for Ginny

Weasley, and prayed to whoever was listening that Harry had not thrown his life away for her. He had seemed confident, however, that he could bring her back.

"How is your mother, Mr. Weasley?" Dumbledore asked, and Ron rubbed his unshaven cheeks and sighed.

"She's falling to pieces, sir," Ron said. "Clinging onto the hope Harry gave her last night."

"And you?" Dumbledore continued, his eyes void of their familiar twinkle.

Ron chuckled – bitterly. “I’m commander of the Twilight Guardians and the Army of the Darkslayer!” he exclaimed, throwing up his arms and scowling. He fell silent at that but only for a moment. “And I’m clinging onto the same hope....”

“Harry wouldn’t av’ given yer the job if he didn’t think yer were up to it, Ron,” Hagrid said, throwing a piece of meat the size of a small tree towards the nearest Thestral. “You kids are all grown up now....”

Ron just shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. He didn’t want the job, or the responsibility. Many times since he had met Harry he had imagined himself in the place of the Boy Who Lived, doing some of the things that he did and... basking in the glory and fame of it. But now, after only a day, he could truly appreciate the burden it was to lead.

And Harry had survived so much, carried the weight for so long. At any moment Ron expected the weight to crush him. Was that how Harry felt...?

No, not Harry, he was too strong for that. But how could anyone be expected to carry such a weight? Ron was simply mystified by that. What force in existence dumped all this on Harry?

And I’m only carrying a small portion of the burden, he thought. No bigger than a pebble compared to what Harry deals with.

“And how is Miss Granger?” Dumbledore asked.

Ron thought the old headmaster seemed a tad unnerved. There was a tightness around his eyes and he kept glancing around at the grounds, shrugging his shoulders.

Ron smiled as he thought of Hermione. She had taken to the task Harry had given them with more excitement than trepidation. She wanted to prove that she could do it, that what she was doing mattered. Ron could tell her that it did, even if they all died in the coming months.

No, he wouldn't think about that. Harry would come back from... death... with Ginny, and he would defeat Voldemort and the world would be free. That was what would happen – what Ron had to believe. A happy ending though, felt more like a dream that was shattered every time he truly thought about it.

“Hermione is... stronger than I am,” Ron managed. “She’s already planning everything out as she says Harry should have done. Filing reports, buying stores and supplies....” Ron waved his hand through the air before him. “When Harry gets back she’ll have organised everything so well that he’ll probably leave her in charge.”

“Organisation was never one of Harry’s strengths,” Dumbledore smiled. “He has always been a soldier, a fighter, really.”

Ron nodded. “That he has... anyway, Professors, I can’t stay all day. Ten thousand troops are expecting weapons and I have to make sure they get-”

Suddenly a bolt of lightning struck the ground not twenty feet away. A cloudless sky swam overhead and yet another bolt struck the ground, and a ripple of the power flowed across the earth. The wind began to howl as it was sucked in towards these freak bolts of power.

In the blink of an eye Ron had his wand out, as did Dumbledore and they raised shield charms as one. Hagrid was trying to calm the Thestrals, but they seemed beyond reason. Screeching and rearing up on their legs, the herd bolted for the forest. The lightning strikes increased and the ground began to shake.

And then Ron saw a strange and terrible thing.

The air... the space of empty air above the ground began to twist.

Before it tore open he had time for one thought, and that thought was: *Merlin, we’re dead if this is Voldemort.*

A great tearing sound broke reality apart and the wind was sucked into the opening void. Down on one knee with Dumbledore behind him, Ron glared at the hole into the Boundary and watched as... something... a figure wrapped in a sphere of light, tumbled out of it and faded as it hit the ground.

A second later and the air twisted again, sealing over the wound to the fabric and the air stopped spinning, the ground stopped shaking, and the unnatural lightning struck its last. Ron and Dumbledore dissipated their shield charms. Hagrid was off after the Thestrals, into the forest.

That was a gateway, Ron thought.

"That was a gateway," Dumbledore said, his voice grave. "Do you agree, Ronald?"

Ron nodded. "What the hell came out of it?"

"I believe," Dumbledore said, looking pensive, "that it may be best to proceed with caution."

"You first, sir."

Together, Ron and Dumbledore flanked the man that had fallen out of the gateway – Ron taking the left, Dumbledore the right – and kept their wands trained on the figure. He was moving, groaning, and completely naked. Across his body there were bruises, cuts and several large gashes.

It can't be a coincidence that he came out here, Ron thought. Not many people know about the gateways – only a handful... who is it?

It wasn't Harry, that much he could tell. Although this figure had dark hair, he was taller than Harry and slightly better built. The years had been hard on Harry, and although he was strong his body wasn't corded with muscle like this man's. He also had two whole legs, whereas Harry's left was metal from the knee down. And this man was perhaps in his early

forties – not old, by wizarding standards.

“Light, I made it,” the man said, turning onto his back and coughing. “By the grace of the Creator I made it!”

“Good morning,” Dumbledore said jovially, smiling and pointing his wand between the man’s eyes. “Welcome to Hogwarts.”

Ron came up on the left and glanced into the man’s eyes. They were bloodshot, watering and he seemed to be having trouble focusing. “Can we help you?” he asked.

“I seek the Darkslayer,” the man said, crawling up onto his knees. “Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived.”

Ron remembered something Harry had told him a few weeks ago.

“I’ve only enemies beyond this world, Ron. The Guardians are dead, gone – anything that comes through a gateway isn’t likely to be a friend.”

“You expecting a lot of people to come through these gateways?” Ron asked.

Harry’s eyes flashed. He looked tired, very tired. “No,” he said after the moment had stretched on... Then he smiled. “No... not people.”

“Why, my dear boy, would you seek him?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes still twinkling.

The man’s eyes hardened. “Watch your tongue, *boy*,” he growled at Dumbledore. “My age can be counted in millennia.” He looked around and up at the waving flags on the parapets of the castle. “And I have finally come home,” he whispered.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows raised and he took a step back. The man crawled to his feet, and despite his nakedness there was an air of command and respect about him. Pride and power. Ron felt it, saw it in

his posture. It reminded him of Harry, although not as commanding.

"I am the Guardian Godric Gryffindor," the man said, and Ron almost dropped his wand. Gryffindor turned to look at him and Ron saw a long scar cut up the right side of his cheek, from the corner of his mouth up into his ear. "William...?" Gryffindor whispered.

"Ron Weasley," Ron said, and then, after a long moment of careful thought, lowered his wand and offered his hand to the man.

Gryffindor grasped his inner forearm and Ron his. "Well met, Ron Weasley... you remind me of a man I once knew. A very dear friend of mine, who died a long time ago." There was an ashen and crippling shadow that rippled across the man's face, but it was gone a moment later.

Dumbledore was doing some fast spellwork and, from a scrap of cloth conjured a pair of fine robes which the man who called himself Gryffindor shrugged on with a word of thanks.

"I saw you in Harry's memories," Ron said, after sharing a look of bewilderment with Dumbledore. *What am I supposed to do now?* he thought. *Well, Harry left me in charge... he wanted me to make these choices.* "You sent him back after he made it to the Ways of Twilight. Sent him back with a block on his memories." There was a hint of anger in Ron's voice at the end there.

Because of that block, he thought, Harry was captured and tortured by the vampires....

Gryffindor looked up sharply, his gaze piercing Ron. "How many months has it been since the Darkslayer returned? How many?" Urgency and fear were rampant in Gryffindor's words.

Another look with Dumbledore. "Four, or thereabouts," Ron shrugged.

"And the block on his memory is no longer in place?"

Ron shook his head. "No, it isn't. He broke through it two or so months ago."

Gryffindor slumped and his face seemed to drop. "Then he is insane... he must be. All those memories so soon after the shift in reality would have destroyed his mind."

"He is stronger than that," Dumbledore said, with his usual cheerfulness. "May I offer you a lemon drop, Mr Gryffindor?" Gryffindor stared at the bag of sweets that had appeared in Dumbledore's hand and then turned back to Ron. "He is... sound of mind then? Harry Potter, is he sane?"

Ron thought about that for a moment and then decided to tell the truth as he saw it. "No," he said with a sigh, and then, "But he is the right kind of insane."

"You must take me to him at once!"

"That may present some difficulties," Dumbledore said, with a great deal of understatement.

"Why?"

"He... er..." Ron searched for the right words. "He—Harry's gone. Something happened and it forced him back out of this world."

Gryffindor paused and, with great difficulty, managed to speak. "Where did he go?"

Ron opened his mouth but Dumbledore beat him to it. "I think," the old professor said, "it may be wise to ask you some questions before we answer anymore. Let us take tea in my study, up at the castle."

Gryffindor's eyes flashed but, after a long moment, he nodded. "I would very much like to step inside the castle again. Please, lead the way."

Ron came last, shaking his head and running a hand through his hair. *Godric Gryffindor!* he thought. *Godric bloody Gryffindor! Wait until Hermione hears about this. She won't believe it until she sees for herself.*

Hermione fastened her cloak about her shoulders securely and brushed her hair back into manageable bunches. Picking up her folders, she gazed out of the nearby window at the vast expanse of desert that was the heart and most of the land on the Australian continent.

She was tired, having travelled half the night to get here. Without Harry to apparate them through any and all wards and across international boundaries travel was a lot more... frustrating.

A portkey to the Australian Ministry, upon which she was security checked twice and searched. Hermione tried to suffer that with a smile, but it was difficult. After that was a three hour session with the woman Harry had left in charge - the old, hard-faced Auror Maggie Thorn – to relay Harry's orders.

She wasn't to know he had disappeared however. Any sign of weakness, and the shaky power structure Harry had built in that country would collapse in an instant. They had to believe he was still out there, that he could come back at any moment.

After the Ministry it was half a dozen portkey trips to half a dozen secure locations before Hermione had finally arrived at this massive military base in the middle of the desert. The sheer size of it had left her breathless upon arrival, her precious folders and files clutched under one arm. She knew Harry had been busy – but this.

It was simply extraordinary.

Rows of white barracks for the soldiers, training fields and camps,

shooting ranges, recreation areas and, stretching all the way to the horizon, housing for civilians. Harry was preparing for the long run.

Harry was building a city here, under the sway of his military. If it kept growing it would one day house hundreds of thousands. And it was still growing. Ministry spellworkers and contractors worked around the clock building new homes and foundations. The landscape was vastly different than it had once been – urbanised.

And all around it, Hermione knew, Harry had placed the strongest shields in existence. Nothing dark or marked could get through them – and so long as Voldemort himself never found this place, and it was in the middle of nowhere, it should still be standing when Harry returned.

If he returns, Hermione thought, turning away from the window and biting her bottom lip. *She didn't know how he'd gone after Ginny... but to go into death, didn't one have to be dead?* She hoped he hadn't thrown his life away. Though if anyone knew what they were doing it would be Harry.

“Scotland is a helluva big country, ma'am,” the leader of the Twilight Guardians said. “And all reports say that storms have blanketed the country, flooding cities and roads. Communications have been almost wiped out.”

“These are Commander Potter's orders,” Hermione replied, a little sharper than she had intended. This man had questioned her ‘supposed’ orders from Harry for the last few hours.

Standing in the operations centre of this mostly deserted desert city, Hermione did feel as if she was in over her head. Who was she to order these soldiers into a fight that could cost them their lives? Why did Harry have to give her this job? People could die because of the choices she made...

On the list of his instructions that he had written last night, Harry had wanted the Twilight Guardians to take a whole battalion – 1,000 soldiers

– into Scotland and wipe out the growing number of Inferi that were hiding in the valleys and mountain ranges around Glencoe.

“At best there are twenty thousand Inferi in Scotland, Captain,” Hermione continued, raising her chin and looking the seasoned soldier square in the eye. She thought Harry would have been proud of her for that, Ron as well. “That is a force capable of overrunning a city as large as Glasgow. They need to be destroyed.”

The man shook his head and stroked his chin. He was a muggle, and the thought of magic and magical beasts must still be messing with his head. “You want me to invade my own island, ma’am. Invade the United Kingdom and shoot up these... these monsters.”

Hermione kept her composure and then glared at the stubborn man. “I don’t want you to do anything. I’m just the messenger here. Harry— Commander Potter, has ordered this. And, for your information, the United Kingdom has already been invaded. You’re going there to destroy the invaders.”

The man hesitated and Hermione saw his allegiance waver for just a moment. He had been unable to contact his government, the British Government, and was lost. Harry suspected foul play on behalf of the Prime Minister, but hadn’t had the time to do anything about it. In his instructions he had told her *not* to trust anyone, especially any man claiming to be the Prime Minister.

“Yes, ma’am,” the Twilight Guardian, known only as Alpha One, said. “Troops will be ready for full deployment in five hours. Reconnaissance will begin in an hour. Full orders as I understand them: Deploy to Scotland, Glencoe – kill anything... that is already dead. These *Inferi*.”

“Ministry Aurors will accompany you, of course,” Hermione continued, her outer calm belying the relief she felt inside that she had been obeyed. Well, that Harry had been obeyed through her. “To provide magical reinforcement and target identification.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Alpha One said, saluting her once.

Hermione turned again and gazed once more out of the window. Down the road she could see soldiers – wizards and witches – training with the weapons Harry had modified. Three thousand rifles and pistols had been delivered through the British Ministry, under Mr. Weasley and Dumbledore a week ago, and yet there were still at least five thousand men and women here who had no weapons beyond their wands.

That was another problem Harry had set down in his instructions, one Hermione knew would take a lot to solve. Mainly because it meant stealing the weapons from the muggles, and then following the designs Harry had brought back with him. The Weasley twins, she knew, were working on some devices of Harry’s devising....

It might be time to pay them a visit, and see what she could squeeze out of them.

Things are moving so fast, Hermione thought as she gazed out of the window and towards the setting sun in the west. Twilight was about to descend over the land. Such a small piece of this world she could see, and yet in a few months it might be all that remained of civilisation.

If Harry comes back, she thought. *I can’t believe I’m standing here... this is too big for me.* Did Harry ever think that? Maybe he did, years ago, before Evil forced him to take action and do what had to be done to save everything, to ensure the survival of everything! Now, he lived for one thing and one thing only – Ginny. She was his anchor, a tether to the world he hated.

And Hermione knew that to be true. Harry hated this world, hated all worlds. He tried not to, but he was so seeped in the corruption and anger, evil and pain, of life that some of that must have rubbed off on him. Why then did he fight?

Defiance? All of his defiance was broken last night, and it would take

time to heal. Time the world didn't have, time in which Voldemort could kill millions – or worse, let them live for when he assumed command of this world. With Harry gone, there was nothing to stop him.

"Will Commander Potter return soon, ma'am?" Alpha One asked, hands clasped behind his back and his face neutral.

"Soon," Hermione nodded. *It has to be soon, or everything we're doing will be for nothing.*

How much time do we have? she wondered, with more than a little fear. *How much time before Voldemort strikes and realises that Harry isn't here to challenge him?* The answer, she feared, could be counted in very short days.

"This couldn't have happened at a worse time," Godric Gryffindor said, standing before the fireplace in Dumbledore's office. "Why, Potter, why now?" The last was whispered into the flames. "You say I missed him by only a few hours?"

"He left last night," Ron replied, seated opposite Dumbledore and slowly stirring the sugar into his tea. "Didn't know when he'd be back."

Gryffindor frowned. "Then mayhap he knew something of what he was doing...."

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm...?" Gryffindor was pulled from his thoughts. "Only that in Death time flows differently."

"How so?" Dumbledore asked.

Gryffindor waved his hand dismissively. "Here, in the mortal realms, time can be manipulated back and forth, and even through the present – side

to side – in the Boundary time can only move forward, never back. But in Death... well, time doesn't flow at all in Death, but one still feels its pull."

"You've been where Harry's gone?" Ron asked, raising his eyebrows. "Into Death?"

Gryffindor laughed. "Only to the precipice of that dark realm, young Weasley. I became a Guardian, which is a living creature, after I 'died' here a thousand years ago. None who enter Death ever return... So very little is known about that realm."

Fawkes hummed softly on his golden perch, his deep eyes resting solely on Gryffindor. The castle itself seemed to sense the presence of one of its founders, for Hogwarts never felt more alive. It was nothing that could be seen, but it could be felt. As if everything was as it should be.

"Harry'll be back," Ron stated. "He will."

They all heard the uncertainty and fear in his voice, and a foul silence fell upon the room after his words. Where Harry had gone, willingly, was a place beyond the sway of all the rules that governed the worlds of life. Death was a whole new deck of cards – a pack containing nothing but jokers.

"And you, Ron, were left in charge of his armies in his absence?" Gryffindor asked, breaking the quiet.

Ron nodded reluctantly. "I was, so was another of Harry's friends. She's down there now in Australia, carrying out his orders."

Gryffindor blinked. "Orstraylaia?"

"The world has changed since you last walked it," Dumbledore said, tapping his fingers together. "It is a lot smaller these days."

Gryffindor nodded. "The Destroyers are gathering their strength for an assault on the world – I've spent the last few weeks evading their forces

just beyond the Boundary surrounding our universe. Some billions are already poised to attack... why? How could they know that this world is the only one that matters now?"

"Voldemort," Dumbledore said. "The last surviving heir of the line of Slytherin. According to Harry, he opened a gateway at Stonehenge and summoned a Destroyer, in hopes of commanding the demons that are imprisoned between universes. The Destroyers learnt that the Darkslayer was upon this world, and allied themselves with Voldemort."

Gryffindor absorbed that slowly, his eyes cold and unseeing for a moment, and then he began to laugh. "So," he said, "in the end it all comes back to the war Slytherin started a millennium ago. The oath has yet to be fulfilled, and now everything tilts towards the void."

Ron didn't think Gryffindor knew he was absently stroking the long scar on the side of his face. "What oath?" he asked.

A tear rolled slowly down Gryffindor's cheek. "Ah, it feels like only yesterday," the Guardian said – and despite his human form he was still a powerful Guardian, one of the remaining ones – sighing with regret and loss. "And yet it has been one thousand years. I speak of the oath I made to Slytherin, as he died... at Stonehenge."

Dumbledore blinked, but then managed a small smile. "We are all connected, it seems, in this eternity long game. Please, continue."

Gryffindor did not seem to hear him, but he spoke anyway. Had to speak, as the last thousand years and all the pain before became new again. "Everything must have a beginning," he whispered. "As he lay dying at Stonehenge, Slytherin told me that it would never be over – the war he started, to cleanse the world of all save the purebloods... and their muggle slaves."

"Sounds familiar," Ron muttered.

"I believed what he said," Gryffindor continued. "So I made the oath: *'This war has just begun, Slytherin. And as long as one of your descendants strives to kill all those who are innocent, I promise you that one of mine will be there to stop him.'* Gryffindor's face became hard, serious. *"For however long this war lasts, I take a magical oath now. I swear that those who follow in my blood line will be protectors of the innocent. Sworn to fight your line and those that serve it. Until the ending of the world if needs be."*

"The ending of the world...." Dumbledore echoed, as all fell silent – including Fawkes.

"And now it looks as though that the oath will be fulfilled one way or the other," Gryffindor sighed. "With Slytherin's final death, or the end of creation itself. One can only hope for the former..."

"It is all connected," Ron said, gazing back across the years. So much that had seemed random now made sense, and all that seemed chaos could be made to fit the oaths and prophecies given time. Harry had once told him never to doubt fate, but always fight it.

"There's nothing to be done for it now," Gryffindor continued, his eyes sweeping between Dumbledore and Ron. "The Darkslayer is gone, perhaps forever – we must prepare this world to battle the legion of Destroyers."

"I could use the help," Ron confessed. "All the history books say you were a great commander in your time, Gryffindor."

Gryffindor snorted. "I suppose I... led, more than most back then – during the First War of Slytherin. But this is not the world I remember, although the enemy remains the same. We will do what we can, and prepare to fight without Harry Potter."

"He'll be back," Ron said firmly. "He fought through hell and time once to get back here, and this time he went willingly."

“That he did,” Gryffindor mused, and Ron saw that he was concentrating hard on his hands – staring at the backs of them and turning them about. “*Accio Parchment!*”

Wandlessly, Gryffindor summoned a stack of bound parchment from Dumbledore’s desk. He smiled. “My mortal powers return,” he said. “And I still carry the powers of a Guardian.”

“There is much to discuss,” Dumbledore said. “And precious little time in which to do it.”

“Right you are, Headmaster.” Gryffindor inclined his head. “How right you are. Let us begin. Tell me, Ron, of our world....”

August
After
Scotland, Glencoe

13th
Midnight

It was raining in Scotland – long lashing sheets of heavy water that made visibility very poor. No more than a few feet in any direction. That improved only slightly when the unnatural red lightning tore across the sky every few seconds, followed by deafening thunder that seemed to shake the very earth beneath the feet of the two hundred Twilight soldiers.

Alpha One stood inside the command tent erected in the centre of a small valley between the shoulders of three of the taller mountains in the Scottish valley. The rain was loud on the roof of the tent but not as loud as it should be. The magical folk had cast repelling charms and other useful spells against the absurd weather.

Gazing down at the maps and reconnaissance charts before him, Alpha One spoke softly with his team members and advisors, going over the possible courses of action they could take. Commander Potter had advised them to concentrate their efforts near the town of Kinlochleven –

that the Inferi were heavy there. The town was two miles away east, but little remained of it. The loch it was built aside had flooded days ago, with the water levels continuing to rise.

Still, his scouts in the field had reported brief skirmishes with the undead enemy. Skirmishes ending, so far, with only three casualties and seven injuries – none severe – with three hundred of the enemy destroyed. Three hundred of *at least* 20,000. It was not cause for celebration, but it was a start.

Outside of the command tent large pavilions had been erected for the soldiers, all two hundred of them. Those furthest along in the training, all equipped with a magically modified rifle, pistol, and an array of altered explosives. Most of them were just kids with little to no experience, but they'd get that soon enough.

"This ridge," Alpha One traced his finger along the map. "Next to the town – you say there are ruins alongside the mountain beneath it?"

"Aye, sir," the most recent scout to return said. "They ain't natural either," he continued, shrugging his rifle over his shoulder. "They felt... wrong, if you follow me, sir. And they were shinin' in the night, through the rain even. Red, dark red – like blood. Smoking, too, they were."

"Any contact with the enemy?"

The scout nodded. "Few up on the ridge, but nothing I couldn't handle, sir. Down in the valley though... near the forest. When the lightnin' lit up the sky it was as if the ground were movin', sir."

"Moving, soldier?"

The scout shrugged again and a faint smile slipped across his face. "There were a lot of 'em, Captain – some thousands. And... well, there were other things, too."

"Such as?"

“Coming in and out of the shiny ruins, sir. Other creatures. Don’t remember much of my magical creatures course back at school, but I reckon I saw a lethifold or two, and a Nundu.” The scout shivered, and it had nothing to do with the fact that he was soaked through to his bones.

Alpha One heard gruff curses and gasps from the magical folk around him. “Nundu?” he asked.

“Magical beast, Captain,” one of the advisors said behind him. “Very... difficult to destroy. One has never been taken down without the combined efforts of a hundred wizards.”

“High threat then,” Alpha One sighed. “But this area—” He circled the ridge and forest next to Loch Leven on the map. “—is our hotspot, people. These are our invaders.”

“It would be foolish to attack that many, even when the remainder of the battalion arrives in a few hours,” a wizened witch said, shaking her head. “Suicide. Ten thousand would not be enough against all the Inperi and Merlin knows what else hiding in and around these ruins.”

“I agree,” Alpha One replied. “That is why I’m sending in the Twilight Guardians alone, and the rest of the battalion can concentrate their efforts on the surrounding valleys. I intend to cut out their heart at Loch Leven, and then exterminate any stragglers. We’re going to deal this... Dark Lord, a mighty blow.”

“The Twilight Guardians against the thousands in that valley, Captain?” the oldest and most respected magical advisor in the group asked softly.

“Aye,” Alpha One nodded. “The Twilight Guardians and several dozen of those lightweight explosives we received a week ago.”

The Alpha, Bravo and Charlie teams of the Twilight Guardians moved

silently along the ridge that Alpha One had circled three hours ago back at the field base. It was early morning now and still the storm raged overhead, as it had been doing for the last few days.

The small force of warriors made up only fifteen in number, but they were invisible against the shadows of the mountain above them and the slight rise in the ridge. They could look down into the approaching valley, at the glowing ruins, but it was doubtful that – even on a clear night – anyone or *anything* would be able to see them.

The eight men and seven women travelled light, equipped only with their enhanced armour and weaponry, as well as an array of muggle devices designed for quick use in the field, like a one man tent and a day-pack that could be stretched to last three, if the worst should happen.

As well as the standard uniform and weapons, each Twilight Guardian also carried two long, metallic cylinders strapped to their backs. These cylinders were warm to the touch and, like their modified rifles, packed more of a punch than ordinary explosive. They had thirty between them, but ten would be enough to turn this infested valley into a sea of fire.

“All clear, Bravo?” Alpha One whispered into his radio. Bravo had the lead, and Charlie were bringing up the rear. So far there had been no contact with the enemy, although they had discovered the rotting corpses of the Inperi the scout said he encountered.

“All clear, Alpha,” came the reply. “Enemy sighted in the valley – just a glimpse during the last strike – estimate four thousand Inperi.”

“Report back in two minutes when you reach the crest of the ridge,” Alpha One relayed his orders. “We’ll rendezvous there and proceed with the plan after visual assessment.”

“Understood. Bravo One out.”

Alpha One got his first look at the enemy down in the valley a few minutes later when he rounded the edge of the ridge and a large bolt of

lightning lit up the area for miles around. The lumbering corpses that should have lain dead moved around in the valley and the edge of the loch with little purpose, stumbling into each other and clawing at the dirt and tress of the forest.

Despite all of his training, Alpha One felt a rush of fear at seeing these creatures – even at this distance. He had grown up ignorant of the other world that existed alongside his own, the magical world. To know that all the nightmares of what could be hiding in the dark were actually real, and were rising up to claim the world, was hard to accept. He pushed the fear down however, and resumed his command.

“Charlie, rendezvous in one minute beyond the ridge edge.”

“Copy that.”

Those ruins also tugged at the Twilight Guardians – all of whom were muggles. They felt... bad, wrong. A corrupt blight on an otherwise normal place. The foundations looked like they once supported a tall tower, but that tower had fallen. Large chunks of black stone, some weighing hundreds of tonnes, littered the ground around the broken stump of the tower.

A faint crimson light hung over it all, and there were shadows in that light. Half glimpsed forms of creatures that were, again, the fear in nightmares. Alpha One had been studying the wizarding books on magical creatures, but couldn't even begin to understand half of what his enemy possessed.

No matter, he thought. These explosives will destroy the lot of them.

The three teams met at the crest of the ridge a few minutes later, all sodden and all looking grim. Every one of them had gotten a good look down into that valley, and knew the next few hours were going to be difficult.

“We need to set the charges around the perimeter – a mile-wide radius,”

Alpha One spoke quickly, quietly – all about the mission. “With... ten charges spread about the valley inside the enemy territory. Now, these cylinders will fire from a standard grenade launcher, such as the ones on the underside of your rifles, for a distance of three hundred metres. This means we’re going to have to get pretty damn close. Any questions?”

“Time?”

“Two hours from now I want those explosives melting this valley,” Alpha One breathed. “We’ll proceed forward from here in the set teams. Alpha will take 360, Brave 120, and Charlie 240. Standard triangular formation. Set charges at your degree and then launch four cylinders into the mess from your positions. 0500 explosive set. Any questions?”

“Fall back?”

“If you’re charges aren’t in place by 0430 then fall back to this ridge. If the ridge is inaccessible then launch personal raft into the loch and head downstream. Stay clear of the forest, we do not know what’s in there. Do not be within two miles of this valley at 0500. Any questions? No, then move out.”

Alpha Team had the greatest distance to travel to 360, or due north from their current position. Roughly one and a half miles to the other side of the valley. Under these conditions, they could be there in fifteen minutes, so long as none of the enemy was encountered.

It was 0345 now, which meant they had forty-five minutes to set their explosives and head back to the ridge. Manageable, even allowing for contact with the enemy.

Alpha moved swiftly, silently, through the night and around the edge of the valley. The rain was an ally at the moment, for if it were a clear night they would be lit up like the sun for anything in that valley. As it was, nothing hindered their progress for the first mile, but then they made contact with a nest of Inferi.

Alpha One was leading and he had his rifle butt raised into his shoulder groove when they crested a small hill and came down the leeward side near to the rising waters of the loch. They were almost upon the Inperi when the wind changed and carried a guttural scream through the splashing of the rain.

Then, out of the shadows, forms solidified and Alpha didn't hesitate.

Efficiently, having reacted instantly to the cry on the wind, Alpha One opened fire and a split second later the other four members of his team spread out and cut down the dead monsters. Still dressed as they had died, the dozens of Inperi were cut asunder by the sphere fire of the Twilight Guardian's weaponry.

"Move," Alpha One cried. Their fire would have marked their position for anything that had been looking. Shooting down the last few Inperi in their path, Alpha broke out into a quick jog and were soon lost to the shadows amongst the curtain of rain.

Over the constant pitter-patter of raindrops, the rushing sound of the flooded Loch could be heard up ahead as well, and it was that sound that guarded Alpha the remaining distance to their position 360 degrees from the ridge. Glancing at his luminescent wrist watch, Alpha One caught the time at 0415.

Bravo and Charlie should be in position and setting their charges, he thought. Yet there had been no communication... they had not reported their status, and in the fire fight Alpha One had forgot to check in. He cursed his own forgetfulness and grasped his radio.

"Set the charges," he told the rest of his team, unclipping the radio from his shoulder and dropping his pack. "Five minutes we're out of here." Alpha One walked away a few paces, wiping his face from the rain and spoke quickly into the radio. "Bravo, status report. I repeat, Bravo, report in."

A few moments passed....

“This is Bravo Three, Alpha,” the static reply came through. “Nine charges set – preparing to fire final into the fray. Estimated time at rendezvous 0430.”

“Understood, Alpha One out.” Alpha One looked over his shoulder and saw two of his team planting the charges as instructed, whilst the other two were loading the explosive canisters into their launchers. “Charlie, status report. I repeat, Charlie, report in.”

The radio hissed and nothing but static buzzed through the receiver. Fifteen seconds ticked by before Alpha One repeated his order, feeling a surge of worry and concern. He looked out into the general direction he expected Charlie to be, but of course could see nothing more than a few feet away in that direction.

“Charlie – all, Charlie. Anyone respond!”

One... two... three... four... five—

“This is Charlie Five,” a female whisper came through the radio. “All charges set.... Alpha.”

Alpha One let go of a breath he didn’t realise he was holding. “Understood, Charlie. Why the delay in response?”

“This is Charlie One,” another whisper, male this time, came through the radio. “We were... are... being hunted by something, something huge.”

“Do you have a visual?” Alpha One asked.

“N-Negative, Alpha leader,” Charlie One replied. “Big, long... moving fast across the ground. Only saw it in the shadows, last seen heading towards the loch.”

“Any other enemy contacts?”

“Pockets of Inferi, nothing more. Heading back to rendezvous now –

0435 arrival.”

“Understood, Charlie – radio back at 0435.”

Alpha One clipped his radio back onto his shoulder harness and turned back to his team just as the first two canisters were launched inland into the deeper parts of the valley. Three of the canisters had been set for explosion nearby, and Alpha Four was returning now for his second and last.

“Two minutes,” Alpha One whispered to his team, and then began priming his own canister, setting it for 0500 before slipping it into the launcher under the barrel of his rifle.

Tuf!

The canister was launched through the rain and lost to sight almost instantly. A faint smoky trail hung in the air for a moment before the rain washed it away. One minute later and all the canisters were in place – thirty of them all across and around the valley. It was 0430 – in thirty minutes this valley would be dust.

“Pack up and prepare to move out,” Alpha One said, picking up his own pack and securing it tightly once more. “Rendezvous is the rid—”

The radio hissed and beeped.

“Alpha, this is Bravo One.”

“Bravo One go ahead,” Alpha One spoke into the small black box.

“Multiple... targets... large snakes – sixty, maybe eighty feet long. Jesus, Alpha, heading towards the loch – heading towards you!”

Alpha One cursed but maintained his composure in front of his team members. He was the leader and would remain calm, even under circumstances such as these.

“How many, Bravo?”

“Seven... at least. We’re up top of the ridge now and just watched them slither out of those glowing ruins. They came out of the ground, up out of the ground.”

Basilisk, Alpha One recalled the name from the magical creatures texts he had been studying. *The King of Snakes. Could be up to one hundred feet long, poisonous fangs, to look into their eyes was instant death – petrification if it’s a reflection. Oh yeah, and they’re supposed to be rare.*

“We make a break for the ridge now, people,” Alpha One spoke quickly, confidently, and kept his rifle raised into the darkness back the way they had come. “Double time – shoot to kill anything that moves. Go, go now.”

It was more of an open run than a quick jog now. All of Alpha had heard the radio call and knew what could be on the way. They all had faith in their weapons when facing smaller, less deadly foes like the Inferi... but a real monster over fifty feet long. All of them knew it would take a lot more fire power than they had to take down one of those beasts in any reasonable amount of time.

Running across the sodden ground through the dark, with the valley set to explode around them, Alpha only made it half a mile before the Inferi were upon them.

Team Bravo made it back to the ridge with minimal enemy encounters – a few of those zombies, nothing more, and definitely something the team could handle. Their charges were set and they were back with twenty five minutes to spare at 0435. Huddling around a small hot-packet, the members of Bravo kept a strict watch on the path for the other teams.

Bravo One knew that Charlie was to report in at 0435, so that would be the next team marker. He moved out onto the edge of the ridge to see if

he could catch a glimpse of the team when a ripple in the shadows over by the glowing ruins caught his eye.

“Eyes over here,” Bravo One whispered to his team and was soon joined by Bravo Two and Three. “Do you see what I see?”

There were large, bulky shapes rising out of the ground over by the ruins. Huge masses of flesh that looked like giant snakes, slithering over the debris of the tower and heading almost due north towards the loch, towards Alpha.

“*Je-sus*,” Bravo Two cursed. “What the fuck are they?”

Bravo One reached for his radio. “Alpha, this is Bravo One.”

Charlie One pushed his team hard up to the ridge. He had one of his feelings that everything was about to go wrong, that something wasn't right. At forty five, with short greying hair and hard eyes, Charlie One had seen a lot of battle campaigns in his time, but nothing as messed up as this one.

A magical war, and his government fighting it in the shadows, battling monsters and nightmares. He shook his head as the four members of his team rushed by him, as he guarded their flank.

Charlie One's instincts had served him well over the years, and they were screaming at him now to run, to get the hell out of the valley. There was something in the shadows, shapes and eyes, he was sure. First there had been that giant... something... that he couldn't even be sure he'd seen, then the Inferi which they tore apart quickly, and then the growls on the wind that the entire team could hear.

Growls that were getting closer with every passing moment.

Faster, Charlie One thought, must go faster. His instincts told him to run as if the fires of hell were chasing him.

Charlie was halfway up the path to the ridge when a huge mass of rippling muscle darted passed them and spun on its legs, growling and hissing.

Charlie opened fire without hesitation, lighting up the ridge and cutting into the beast before them, that looked like an overgrown – severely overgrown – leopard.

All of the team leaders had been studying the magical creatures texts, and Charlie One recognised this as a level five beast. A Nundu, one of the worst, if not the worst, creatures on the planet.

Poisonous breath, hide extremely thick. It is fast, no real weaknesses.

The sphere fire surprised the beast and it reared back on its hind quarters, exposing its underbelly. The glowing spheres had little more effect there, only serving to knock the creature onto its back.

“We’ve pissed it off now,” Charlie One said. “MOVE!” he then roared at his team. “Up the ridge, faster, faster.”

The team raced passed the beast just as it flipped itself into the side of the mountain, growling and thrashing. Charlie One unclipped a grenade from his belt and pushed the blue button on its top. *Five seconds...*

He tossed it at the beast and then broke into a run after his team, reaching for his radio. “Bravo this is Charlie, we’re coming in hot. I repeat, one of the big bastards on our tail. Sphere fire ineffective. Suggest plasma grenades.”

There was a reply but Charlie One didn’t hear it. Adrenalin pumped through his system and his heart pounded in his chest. Behind him the cries of the

Nundu were washed out as his grenade went off. A blinding flash of light, rock was seared away, but the impact on the stone behind him told

Charlie

One that the beast had survived.

The growl that came a split second later only served to confirm that.

Shit, shit, shit... Charlie One cursed. *I will not be killed by this son of a bitch.*

Charlie One raced after his team, now closing on the crest of the ridge. He dropped another grenade but knew the beast was less than five seconds behind him. It went off, but the Nundu leapt through the blast unscathed. So far it was uninjured, save for a few singes to its fur. A green mist was rising from its mouth, its poison.

Charlie One knew he was about to become lunch for this bastard, but he'd go down swinging. Or at least go down. He made the ridge, ran up the small crest with his legs pumping hard. He dropped then, expecting exactly what happened. He purposely fell to the ground, cutting his arms open against the rock, and the Nundu bounded over him, its back paw cuffing him in the shoulder and sending him spinning into the side of the cliff above the ridge.

Nearby, the rest of Charlie spun and dropped to their knees, raising their rifles at the behemoth falling through the air before them. Just behind them,

Bravo was armed and ready, launching their plasma grenades as soon as the target was in sight. Three of them sailed too high as the beast came down, but the other two exploded near the Nundu's shoulder joint, and the blast sent it spiralling into the rock face.

They all opened fire as, faster than a bolt of lightning, the Nundu was back on its feet. It leapt and bowled over half of Bravo, digging its claws into whichever team member it landed upon. There was a scream as Bravo Four was pierced, his shoulder crushed.

The other soldiers continued to fire, aiming for the beast's eyes as Bravo Four screamed again. He was a well-trained soldier, been in the service

nearly twenty five years. No family – none that mattered to him anyway – and he had lived alone. On the edge of his mind he watched the beast just shrug off the pulsating power of the sphere shots that hit it.

He watched its head rear up, watched it open its mouth to reveal jagged fangs swimming between a faint grin mist, and Bravo Four knew then that it was about to tear his face off. A quick death, if it killed him. Still, survival of the fittest and all of that. With his good arm, his right, Bravo Four snatched a grenade from his belt and pushed the blue button just as the beast's head began to move down.

With the last of his strength and lucidity, Bravo Four snapped his arm around, grenade enclosed within his fist, and shoved it up before his face. The

beast's mouth came down around his arm and bit it off in one quick wrench, swallowing it whole. Bravo Four screamed again, though at this stage he

was scarcely aware of doing so.

The Nundu exploded from the inside two seconds later. Most of it simply disintegrated, not being as hard on the inside as it was on the out. A fair amount of blood and gore splayed the area around what remained of Bravo Four nonetheless, and splattered the other team members of Bravo and Charlie.

Harsh, half-hearted gasps for breath were all Bravo Four could manage as both Bravo Five and Charlie Five, trained medics, descended upon him with their first-aid kits and magical potions. His wounds were beyond any healing now.

"Did I kill the thing that killed me?" Bravo Four asked, surprisingly clearly.

All of the others in Bravo and Charlie were alive, some with minor wounds. Charlie One had it the worst – a few cracked ribs. They all knew Bravo Four was dead, and he knew it too.

"You got it, Four," Charlie Five said, with a tone of compassion in her

voice. "Saved us all with that stunt, you crazy bastard."

Bravo Four laughed, coughed through blood, and then died.

Alpha couldn't move forward towards the ridge. They were stuck a mile from it at 0435 and time was running out. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Inferi were blocking their path. It seemed every one of the zombies had decided to converge in this part of the valley at this time.

Alpha One cursed his luck and knew they couldn't defend this position for long. The dead were already piled up high, but more of the rotting corpses were climbing over their dead, desperate to scratch out the life of the five Alpha team members. So was their purpose in whatever state between life and death they existed in.

Half a mile behind him, Alpha One knew, was the flooding Loch Leven – and each member of his team carried a small, one-man inflatable raft. The

Loch eventually drained out into the ocean, but before then the winding waters waded through the gap in between the two mountains beside which the command centre was located. If they could make it that far on the rafts then it would be a four mile hike through the lower mountains back to base.

Alpha One unloaded a stream of sphere fire into a wall of Inferi and waited a few seconds before firing again. Too much continuous fire and the weapon would overheat, possibly explode. Again, the rain helped keep it cool – but better to be safe than sorry.

Time was running out... if the Inferi were this thick all the way back to the ridge then it would take several hours to get there. Alpha had minutes before the bombs went off, and precious few of them.

Alpha One made the call.

“RETREAT TO THE RIVER!” he shouted to his team over the weapons fire, rain and harsh screams of the monsters. “THE RIDGE IS CLOSED TO US!”

Leapfrogging cover fire allowed the four members of Alpha to move back behind their leader, gunning down the Inferi as they went. The creatures weren’t fast, even if they had two whole legs, and not that smart. As soon as the five live humans were lost to sight they became confused, erratic, stumbling over one another.

Fuelled by adrenalin, fear, and the heat of the battle, Alpha made good time covering the half-mile distance to the edge of the loch. They encountered no Inferi or anything else, although there was a sense of something hiding in the shadows, just out of sight – always hiding.

0450, Alpha One glanced at his wristwatch. *We need to be at least a mile downstream before 0500.*

True to their training, the other members of Alpha didn’t waste any time. From the small packs on their back they each pulled out a black rubber pouch with a safety-pull tag. The hiss of air rushing into the inflatable boats was lost under the rain and an exceptionally large roll of thunder.

Alpha One was the last to go, being the leader. He saw his soldiers off first and then spoke into his radio. “All Twilight Guardians, this is Alpha One,” he transmitted to Bravo, Charlie, and his own team.

“The ridge is inaccessible for Alpha – we are heading back to base down the river. Bravo, Charlie.”

“Bravo here, sir.”

“Charlie here, sir.”

“You’re to evacuate immediately,” Alpha One said. “Head back to base – we’ll see you all there.”

“Aye, sir,” came two replies, and then, “Sir, Bravo One reporting one casualty. Bravo Four.”

Damn... almost made it. “Understood, Bravo One... sorry to hear that.” *It could have been worse.”*

0454

Alpha One launched his own boat into the river and jumped into the icy water up to his knees before pulling himself into the craft. He kept a sharp watch on the valley as he was pulled outwards into deeper water, rifle aimed at the shoreline. Through the rain he thought he saw something move on the shore, into the river, out of the shadows – but it was only a fleeting glimpse, if it had been anything at all.

0457

“Float three miles down out of the body of the loch and into the river,” Alpha One spoke to his team through the radio. “All Alpha report back in every ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir.” *Alpha Two.*

“Understood, Captain.” *Alpha Three.*

“Yes, sir.” *Alpha Four.*

“A—”

A burst of static was cut off abruptly and Alpha One seized his radio. “Five, respond.”

Nothing... not even static.

Shit, Alpha One thought. 0458. “Does anyone have a visual on Alpha Fi—”

“Holy shit! It came up out of the water,” a near-hysterical voice cut through on the radio. Alpha Two.

“What did, soldier?”

“The snake – the *fucking* snake. Swallowed Five whole.”

Oh... damn.

“It was huge... and, and dark. Just a shadow in the darkness. God, it went back under.”

0459

Alpha One gripped his radio hard and stared out into the turbulent waters around him. He had all but forgotten about the impending explosion back in the valley. The immediate danger came from the water, from under the water. The goddamn Loch Leven monster.

“Stay calm, Alpha,” Alpha One ordered. “Proceed as planned, keep a sharp watch.”

He knew that none of them could get out of the water until the loch narrowed into the river up ahead, and they could paddle back to shore. But there was a basilisk in the water, perhaps more than one. It all came down to chance now.

And then, like a leviathan rising up from the deep, the water to Alpha One’s left – less than twenty feet away – exploded in a haze of foam and a deep roar pierced the night air. A long, thick snake rose up screaming, its hide shining dark green against one of those crimson lightning strikes. Alpha One almost screamed in terror, but his training kicked in and he swung his weapon around in a wide arc....

What the hell am I doing? he thought, a split second before he pulled the trigger. His hand came away from the grip and he crouched down low in his raft, remembering enough to avoid looking into its eyes.

Alpha one didn't know if the beast could see him, or hear him, smell him even, and just trusted to luck now that it wouldn't spot him through the rain on this dark night. All his hopes were dashed however, when a series of the unnatural lightning bolts lit up the water for all to see.

And then it got worse, as a second and third snake – all of equal monumental size, reared up out of the water to the right and behind Alpha One.

Three towering monstrosities of impossible strength and malice.

“That’s just not fair...” Alpha One whispered, and knew he’d been seen as the creatures roared and moved with deadly speed towards his small defenceless boat. For lack of any other options, Alpha One’s hand moved towards the three grenades strapped to his belt.

His hand came down on the first just as his watch beeped... 0500.

The storm, which had been conjured by the Dark Lord, had hidden the sun over this part of the country for many days, and the only light had come from the lightning. Now though, at 0500, the valley and surrounding mountains blazed with the fires and fury of the sun for a few moments.

Rays of magically enhanced explosive shot outwards at the speed of light from the quickly decimated valley. Already infested beyond any normal means of recovery, the land was cleansed in the fires that followed, burning away all of the monsters and turning to dust the ruins of the once towering fortress on the side of the mountain.

A wall of water rose up from the concussive force of the blast, rushing downstream towards Alpha One and the three basilisks. A giant wave, riding the force of the thirty detonations. In just seconds after the explosion, before even Alpha One had realised what had happened, the wave was upon him.

His small boat rose up the side of the swelled mass of water, which

quickly overtook the hissing snakes, and from the top of the wave Alpha One got a good look at the destruction he and the other Twilight Guardians had just inflicted against the Dark Lord's armies.

The explosions had washed across the valley in a heartbeat, leaving fire in their wake. Not many fires, but one long sheet of flame that coated the valley and surrounding hillsides. The forest, which had been about two miles thick, was blown away. Nothing would have survived even the initial blast – nothing had.

Turning his mind back to the problem at hand, Alpha one fastened his harness tightly to the strap on his raft as he rode the crest of the wave. He had gone up to its peak, and now gravity was about to kick in and plunge him back down towards the surface.

I'm about to get very wet, Alpha One thought, and then began to laugh. The mission was a success. He'd dealt a serious blow against a vast amount of the self-styled Dark Lord's forces. He had helped free his country from the tightening grip of a madman. And he'd done it very loudly.

Still, there was one matter that concerned him. The snakes... *at least seven*... had not died in the blast. And this loch eventually led out to sea. Those monsters would have free reign of the entire planet. Commander Potter's ambassador, Hermione Granger, needed to know about this.

But that was neither here nor there now, and Alpha One gritted his teeth, bracing himself for the impending crash.

In the early hours of August 13th, only moments after a certain valley in Scotland went up in flames, Ron found himself back at Grimmauld Place after a hell of a long day explaining the mission to Godric Gryffindor and then spending many hours with him, Dumbledore, some Ministry folk, and Order members making future plans.

He had been awake for over thirty hours, and was looking forward to catching a few hours rest before the day truly began. *Is this how Harry feels all the time?* Ron wondered. *This bloody tired. Merlin, but I'm hungry.*

Grimmauld Place was quiet. Not empty, just quiet. Ron avoided going into the living room, where he knew Harry had placed Ginny last night. Encased in that preservation bubble or whatever the hell it was. He knew that Ginny was dead, dead! But with Harry around that didn't mean what it used to.

"Why doesn't it feel as if she's gone....?" Ron wondered aloud, heading into the kitchen.

Because Harry said he'd bring her back, and Harry is... well, Harry.

Not entirely sure where the rest of his family was, but guessing they were probably either at the Ministry – his dad would be there – or at the Burrow,

Ron quickly poured himself a bowl of cornflakes, for lack of anything better on hand. He needed something to eat, anything, and the milk was fresh.

Sitting at the table a few minutes later with nothing but his thoughts and a half empty bowl of cereal, Ron contemplated heading to bed. He'd have to set an alarm to be up in a few hours – new day, new plans – but in his head there were a hell of a lot of stairs between the kitchen and his room.

An unexpected tear rolled down his cheek, and then the other. Tears of frustration, of anger, of almost-grief. Everything was spiralling out of control... Harry, all of them really, were meddling in forces and powers beyond their understanding. And whilst Harry may have hardened himself against them, Ron was new to the feeling.

It terrified him.

There were steps in the hallway outside and Ron thought it was probably an Order member. He just hoped it wasn't Snape. To his complete surprise, when the kitchen door was pushed open and light spilled in from the corridor it was Hermione standing there, looking tired but beautiful with a box of books and folders tucked under one arm. She seemed equally surprised to see him, but smiled when their eyes met.

Dropping her box onto the table, Hermione walked over to Ron and sat down on his chair, pushing him across a bit and throwing her arms around him. Ron returned the gesture and slowly ran his hand through her long bushy hair.

"Busy day?" he asked her, and when she lifted her head up to meet his eyes again Ron saw tears. "That bad?"

She nodded numbly and sniffed, wiping her eyes on the arm of her blouse. "I don't know how Harry deals with all of this," she said. "Just one day... and I can barely keep up. They wanted me to sign death warrants for three Death Eaters found in Sydney, so they could be – under Harry's laws – *officially* executed. I couldn't do it...."

"What happened?" Ron asked, angry that Hermione would have to take part in the darker aspects of Harry's godforsaken quest. Harry Potter had a lot to answer for.

Hermione just shook her head. "That woman," she hissed. "Maggie Thorn... Oh, I hate her, Ron. The Death Eaters were imprisoned for now, for when Harry gets back."

"I love you," Ron said, abruptly changing the subject. "And let's not talk about all of that nonsense now. We'll have to deal with it all again soon enough, but for now let's talk about *anything* else."

Hermione smiled, after a moment. "But you haven't told me how your day went?"

Ron shrugged and pushed a few of the soggy cornflakes left in his bowl

around with the spoon. "Normal enough," he said. "Well, normal enough for us. I spent the day making battle plans with Dumbledore...."

"...and?" Hermione prompted, sensing something more.

"And...." Ron stretched the word out, taking a deep breath. "Godric Gryffindor."

Hermione blinked, thought back on Ron's words, and then frowned. "That's not funny."

"No, it isn't," he agreed. "But we'll deal with it all later. Do you think you could carry me up to bed? There are a helluva lot of stairs between here and there."

Hermione smirked. "I suppose you want me to tuck you in, too?"

"I never said that," Ron feigned innocence but the gleam in his eyes gave him away. "But I was certainly thinking it very loudly."

Chapter 26 – The Rightful Heir

*To be with her again I will have the
perseverance of a bulldog, but it seems to
me the training is unnecessarily hard.*

~~Odd Thomas

August 14th

Lord Voldemort stood with a quiet fury in what remained of the ruins of his mighty fortress. Dust, ash, and scattered rubble that had once been a

towering monolith a mile high. He had returned here just ten minutes ago, after Potter had forced him to flee on the 11th. That had been an embarrassment.

For the moment the eternal storm the Dark Lord had created some time ago had abated over the smouldering valley and the gushing Loch Leven.

Voldemort had commanded it so. Those furious clouds were slowly spreading across the island of the United Kingdom, and would soon reach beyond it. In time, the storm would coat the entire planet in a sheet of impenetrable darkness.

In time.

Voldemort had returned to this valley in order to bring the five thousand Inferi, as well as a fair amount of other dark creatures, to his new fortress. An old castle long since forgotten by the world. Another relic of Salazar Slytherin, though nowhere near as impressive or impenetrable as his main fortress had been.

He had returned – and found the valley scoured of all life, in his service or not. Just parched and blistered ground that still burnt from whatever had happened here. A pale mist hung in an inversion just overhead, and the light bounced across it casting pale shadows for miles around.

His anger barely tempered, Voldemort's presence had a negative effect on the light under the low clouds. Instead of highlighting him for the world to

see, the light was sucked into him – in a way – it faded around him, destroyed in the blanket of darkness that shrouded him.

"Potter....?" he mused, glancing around at the devastation in the valley. A grim smile marked the snarling face of the Dark Lord. "It has your flare, Potter, but perhaps it wasn't you... You had a hand in it, I think, but an indirect one. Well..."

The thunder returned, as did the bulging purple storm clouds, all with a

thought and the light of the sun was washed away. Voldemort revelled in the darkness, as the clouds began to shine crimson with the waiting lightning.

“An eye for an eye, Potter – an eye for an eye,” Voldemort continued, to himself and to Harry. “I think it time to call the demons out from their eternal prison. See how you fair against them, Potter, wherever you’re hiding. See how this world fairs....”

Voldemort raised a skeletal hand to touch his forehead, and ran a thin finger down it in the spot where, on Harry’s head, his infamous scar burned.

There was no connection to Potter now, however, and that was cause for concern.

He wasn’t dead – Voldemort could be certain of that much, for only he could truly kill him. But it seemed as if the boy had found some way of... *numbing* their connection, hiding it. Voldemort could no more see into the boy’s head than Harry could see into his.

Interesting... concerning...

No matter – the *Darkslayer* would show himself when the sky above this planet was torn open into the void, and the swarm of demons from between all worlds began to flood in. Potter would show himself then. He was too much a hero not to.

August 19th

“You’ve a keen mind for this, Ronald,” Godric Gryffindor smiled, clapping the young Weasley on the shoulder. “A natural talent – better than some life-long campaigners I’ve known.”

Ron nodded, accepting the praise with more than a faint blush. He and

Gryffindor, and Dumbledore and Hermione, as well as a group of other Order members, stood and sat around the meeting room at Grimmauld Place. Ron and Gryffindor were pouring over maps and planning future battles, as they could play out.

Scenario practice.

“Harry thought the same,” Ron shrugged, more than a little awed that Godric Gryffindor, one of the greatest wizards ever, thought that he was doing a good job. “Gave me a couple of books to read on tactics and logistics, planning for war.”

“The Darkslayer...” Gryffindor mused, his eyes flickering away across all of the space between time and universes, and back into memory. “The greatest warrior that ever lived, in any realm. Countless billions would march under your leadership if they knew that Harry Potter valued your planning so much.”

“Well... don’t know about that....” Ron mumbled. “I’d rather be on the front lines, fighting, than anywhere else. That *is* where I’ll be, in the end, next to Harry.”

Gryffindor sighed. “We’ve all parts to play – mayhap it will end how you wish, Ron.”

“I hope so,” Ron said, scratching the back of his neck, and gazing across the room at Hermione. “I get this feeling that... maybe... it’s all going to end in tears. What do you reckon?”

A thin smile appeared on Gryffindor’s face and then was gone a heartbeat later. “If there aren’t tears, then it won’t be the end. Nothing ever ends with happiness. A sad truth, but an unchangeable one. It is the way of the universe.”

Ron ran his hand down a long map of empty land, the hills around the Lake District in the north of England. Having a battle in there would be

like getting lost in a maze. The ground was so hilly and broken that two armies could miss each other entirely at a quarter of a mile.

“Is it? Well... there’s something wrong with that. But I can’t change it... Harry though, if he set his mind to it, could probably do something about that.”

Across the room, Hermione was speaking quickly and quietly with Dumbledore. Like Ron, she had half spread sheets of parchment and paraphernalia littering the tables before her. Some of it was resource forms, order forms, and whatnot. Others were written in Harry’s short and cramped script, covering several feet of parchment.

Written in Harry’s hand hastily... and containing the most advanced knowledge in the world.

“It’s an engine,” Hermione said, speaking to Dumbledore, who stoked his beard thoughtfully. “A magical engine, powered by pure magic and those larger crystals. It can be used to make things fly.”

“Fly?”

Hermione nodded. “Muggles use a very, very primitive form of this design here on their airplanes. The big jumbo jets. What Harry has here are those engines... a century or two down the line. Clean, efficient, light weight, maintenance-free... they’re powerful enough to pull something as heavy as

Hogwarts, too. This,” Hermione tapped the parchment. “This is the future.”

“What do you suggest we do with it? Dumbledore asked.

“Why, build it!” Hermione exclaimed. “We could reverse engineer it, create it from a reserve of light metals. Harry’s written down the incantations, and we have some of his power stored in dozens of those crystals. We can do this, put it on our own airships... The Twilight Air Force. Look, Harry had it all planned.”

"I can see...." Dumbledore mused, still stroking his beard. "The cost would be extraordinary. Even for just one of these..." He read one of Harry's notes and grinned. "...flying fortresses."

"It will be worth it," Hermione assured the headmaster. "We can take basic designs from the muggles, make them better, and add Harry's engines in place of whatever propulsion they had before. The best minds in the world would *pay* to work on something like this. Pioneering the future of modern technology."

"It all comes back to time," Dumbledore chuckled. "How little we have, how to use it, and what to do when the end comes. Ah, Harry, we need you now more than ever."

Hermione sniffed at that, even though she knew it to be right and true. They could do a lot without Harry's help, however. It didn't always have to be

Harry – that wasn't fair on him. No, Voldemort wasn't as powerful as he'd have everyone believe, and his servants were still only human... most of them... Yes, there was definitely plenty to be getting on with without Harry.

"We'll come back to the air force," Hermione said, distracted, leafing through her folders and files. "What we need to talk about next is the politics of the war. Harry wanted ambassadors sent to the governments worldwide that are either wavering, or haven't declared themselves against him. I think this is best handled by our Ministry, and not the Australians."

"That is... wise," Dumbledore said, thinking deeply. Half his life had been spent working the intricacies of politics, both wizard and muggle, and he knew that the Australian Ministry wasn't looked upon with friendliness these days, since it had been overrun by Harry and the Twilight Guardians.

"No, you are right, Miss Granger. The British Ministry had best approach the international community with missives from Harry's... faction."

Was what Harry had rightly called a faction? Hermione wondered, once again leafing through her file for the next item on the agenda. Her eyes were puffy and red around the whites. She wasn't getting enough sleep, she knew, not by half. *Harry never sleeps more than an hour or two...*

Well, if he could do it.

Ah, but he's Harry, a voice in her head, that sounded a lot like Ron, told her calmly. *All bets are off when it's Harry.*

Hermione swatted away the voice angrily and stifled a yawn. "Next," she said. "Food rations for the encampment of Harry's... faction... in the Australian desert. He's feeding ten thousand people three times a day down there. Now, that number is more than manageable, but I've also seen what's being built there."

"Oh?" Dumbledore raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Homes to house thousands, hundreds of thousands maybe. Perhaps even millions, if the contactors keep building and magically expanding the buildings as they have been doing. There are enough resources to feed ten thousand, but a hundred thousand? A million? This is a problem that needs to be solved now... because...."

Dumbledore nodded his understanding. "Because when *it* happens, there is going to be a surge of people suddenly finding themselves housed in Harry's city. Refugees from many countries, no doubt. Those from Ministries he can get on his side at the very least. A lot of people, magical and muggle, and they will need feeding."

Hermione shook her head. "I just don't see where we're going to get the money for all of this. Harry's nearly bankrupt himself as it is, and that's also using the funds he's in control of at the Australian Ministry. Probably very soon the money won't even matter, but it does now – and we need

to be prepared for when it goes down the drain....”

Hermione’s voice trembled at the end there and she cursed her own fear. Dumbledore gently placed a hand on her shoulder, in that grandfatherly way he did things, and laughed softly.

“As with most things in life, Hermione,” he said, “there is a simple answer to the problem, should we be patient enough to look for it.”

Hermione nodded, taking a calming breath. “What do you suggest... Albus?”

The twinkle flared in Dumbledore’s eyes. “What would Harry do?”

“I wish I could ask him,” Hermione whispered. “But I don’t know where he is.”

There was a lot to do, and very little time to do it in. It seemed for years they had had nothing but time in which to prepare in, but now that it came down to the last move the players realised that they didn’t even know how to play the game, and the only one that had any idea was off... hunting the dead.

Chess – war could always be likened to chess. The only difference was that the playing pieces actually possessed souls. They were real people, with real hopes and dreams, fears and regrets. Each had led a life, thought their own thoughts – were the main character in their own damn story.

And now war, on a scale the likes of which had never been known, was threatening every story ever written, and those still in production. Would be that the heroes rise up to win the fight, and save Creation?

Was it worth saving? No, not at the moment.

But there was good there, perhaps, and that would shine before the end. It would grow so dark that the thin film of light that was hope would be

seen before the end, and that hope was Harry. Death was a world away, connected always to mortality and then again nowhere at all. Harry was in Death, had duelled with Death, was Death.

Perception, reality, of death, was no more real than anything else. And all that was, perhaps, real – or had been once – was melting as the fabric of existence rotted at the seams.

But still, the story will out. The theme and the morals might be so many, or none at all, that it has ceased to matter. It was all about survival now – not of the fittest, but of the deserving. And the deserving would be the side that wanted it more. Good or Evil, it didn't matter, it was all Destiny.

A whirlwind of tempestuous fire.... that was Harry as he entered the Veil, the Final Gateway between life and death. A calm, but utterly violent and terrified storm of raw and furious emotion that shook the very foundations of whatever realm he now stood in.

A threnody – a lamentation for, or maybe of, the dead – was playing in his ears, behind his eyes and deep inside of him. A slow, bitter wail that was at once perfect and broken.

Harry had entered the world of the dead, and it was dark – maybe that's how he wanted to see it – and there was nothing.

Nothing but darkness and a rising feeling of potential, of power, and of greatness. He had done what no other had ever done, and he'd done it for love – for the right choice. There was an ethereal glow in this place, in the darkness, and Harry realised it was coming from him.

He was the light... only Harry, only ever Harry.

His footsteps left ghostly imprints on ground that had never been trodden by the living, and there was a rising light in the east, a pale stretch of dawn

across some vast unknowable horizon. Harry walked towards it, not caring if it took him a thousand years to reach it. And it might, or it might only be seconds.

Wraiths, ghosts, souls of the dead and of the dying walked alongside him. Half glimpsed out of the corners of his eyes but disappearing when he turned his head to try and stare at them. They were staring at him, at his life force and the shining, blinding radiance of his aura, which would have paled the very sun.

The dead knew him, saw the Darkslayer, and were awed by his presence. For the dead are given special insight into the workings of creation and time upon their entry into this realm, and Harry Potter was a key player in the workings of life and death, both sides of the coin of existence.

Besides the genuinely dead, there was a corrupt stalking the lands of this world, this realm. And being drawn by Harry's aura, and by a connection to an old enemy, the destroyers of all things arose before the Darkslayer.

Harry felt them on the back of his neck first. A tingling, freezing sensation that rushed down his neck and through his spine. The eyes of the dead... no, the pain of the living. The Suffering of Creation.

Out of the shadows furious crimson eyes were born, created *from* shadow. Millions of tiny pinpricks of that red light appeared, dotting the landscape as far as the rising horizon, which had stopped rising for Harry when he stopped moving.

For the way was barred against such as he.

Is there no place these creatures haven't infested...? Harry wondered, cracking his knuckles and calling forth the only sword of Gryffindor he had left. The blade shimmered in the air, reflecting the glare of over three million pairs of eyes.

Eyes of the Destroyers.

“You’re all going to die,” Harry whispered, and his voice rippled across the many thousands of miles of time and space that warped this realm. “Die beyond death. As I did to you once before, and will again, you will be blasted out of existence. This time, this time there is no coming back.”

Although millions of Destroyers heard him, here on the edge of the realm of the dead, this was only a handful of their true number. Billions more, countless billions, were merging into an army bigger than any that currently habited existence within the Boundary, outside of the main access point to Harry’s real world. These, these creatures were just one unit of that army... just one.

But what were they doing here? Harry wondered.

Why else would they be here? Ethan said, speaking for the first time since Harry entered the veil. That seemed like forever ago... and forever didn’t exist, or did it? *They’re conquering even Death. The dead, the Destroyers, are not bound by the rules of the living. They will enslave even those that have earned eternal rest.*

“Well, I’ve been looking for something to kill,” Harry mused. “These things will do nicely.”

Standing alone against millions of blood-thirsty demons, with the souls of the recently dead at his back – cowering in fear and pain – Harry didn’t even blink. He’d had worse odds.

Allarius was a worse odd... he had been an incarnation of every single Destroyer in the form of one demon. This... this rabble, wasn’t even one per cent of Allarius.

“Flee or fight,” Harry said, his voice again echoing over the aching miles. “You’re all dead either way.”

He grasped his sword with both hands and that marvellous destructive power flared up the shining steel. Blue light, pure and untouched, right to the tip where it burnt like the flames of a fire.

From within the shadows ahead came a long, slow round of applause, and another pair of eyes – sickly green and yellow – appeared. They began to take a few steps towards Harry, the form of the creature still hidden in shadow.

There was something familiar about those eyes.

“Harry, Harry, Harry,” rang a jovial voice. Still clapping, the creature stepped into the light cast by the sword and grinned his old grin. “I brought you a flower, Darkslayer, for our reunion.”

Harry was neither surprised nor calm. He had been expecting something. Why not this?

“Hello, Allarius,” Harry inclined his head, and accepted the bleeding black rose from the demon’s cold dead hand.

“Lord Darkslayer,” Allarius laughed. “Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived. How many titles did the weak and strong of creation give you over the years, the decades, the whole century?”

The rose turned in the light that jumped between Harry’s fingers and across his hand, and the black faded to white, proving once again that Harry was the stronger of the two of them.

“You’re a pale shadow of your former self, Allarius,” Harry mused. “As weak as any of the Destroyers marshalled here. Why show your face to me, of all people?”

Allarius was still smiling. He’d died with a smile on his face. “Recall that storm of rose petals that fluttered down under the twilight sky, Darkslayer.”

Recall them, Harry, recall their meaning.

Harry, having lived a very long time, slowly understood what he was supposed to understand. He opened his hand and the white rose, still bleeding crimson over the petals, hovered in the space between himself and the demon.

He answered his own question.

"You're here to enslave the dead," he said. "To bind the souls of the departed. Oh, Allarius, haven't they suffered enough?"

"The dead don't suffer, Harry. No, no, no, no, no... the dead, they linger. The right magics can enslave weak souls, that is true, but it is not why I am here. I'm no Necromancer, not today. You almost understood, but your mind was always slow."

An army stood behind Allarius, and behind Harry stood the souls of the recently dead, cowering in fear before the demons that barred their path into the worlds and universes of the truly dead and departed.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked again, and his sword surged with power.

"To end death, and break the binding of this book." Allarius's smile deepened and his eyes shone with the sickly yellow light of decay. "To tear the pages of the story asunder, and erase the words that made up existence over the aeons. We, the Destroyer, are here to destroy."

"Ah," Harry did understand. "Same old why, Allarius. You're here to annihilate. But not anymore."

Allarius nodded his agreement. "No, not anymore. I was chosen to lead the assault against the Dead Realm, Potter, for the collective of the Destroyer feared your meeting me in the living realms."

“They were right to be afraid,” Harry nodded. “But they do not know fear yet.” Harry’s eyes scanned the long, seemingly endless, lines of enemies before him, and felt the growing number of departed souls behind him that could not move on. Something... had to give.

“You’ll show them – show us, show me – fear, Harry?” Allarius asked. “I was the Destroyer, once, and now I am a Destroyer. A Destroyer in the service of the Dark Lord Voldemort – *your* Voldemort, the Last Demon.”

“You’ve sworn to him then?”

“We have.”

“You’re coming for Earth, for my world.” It wasn’t a question.

“We are,” Allarius smiled, and blood dripped between his teeth and over his lips. His pale yellow eyes were hardening, crusting over, and the colour was darkening now – into coal.

Two fiery coals of apocalyptic fury.

“You shan’t have it,” Harry said. “You *won’t* have it.”

“By hook or by crook, we will. Ha, ha, ha... didn’t anyone tell you, Harry, it’s over. Armageddon’s been and gone – you missed it – your universe is just one of few left to be destroyed.”

Harry shrugged. “Perhaps,” he said. “But you’ve been known to lie before, demon.”

“Oh, Harry, did I lie about killing Ginny that first time, one hundred years ago?”

Harry’s grip on his blade tightened until the metal of the hilt dug deep furrows into his palm, almost bruising. He had nearly forgotten why he was here in the first place, in Death. He was here for her, always for her.

“You die now.”

Allarius seemed resigned to his fate once again, for he didn't call his magic into being. He simply stood where he was, a sad smile on his face that could have been pitying. The coals of his eyes spun lazily in his sockets, grinding blackened skin away.

“You can always win another battle, Harry Potter – the Darkslayer, and Fate's Biggest Joke – but you'll never win the war. Do you know why? Do you see? A long dead Creator can't help you, and your power has only ever destroyed. You are both sides of the coin – good and evil – and you've done more damage that we Destroyers could ever hope to match.”

“Am I supposed to care?” Harry growled.

Allarius sniffed dismissively, and turned away. He had a final parting shot, however.

“There is more human in me than there is left in you, Potter. It will never be over, not for you. Remember that, even if you remember nothing else. I have a new name for you, a new title. One more for the pile... The *Soulless Hero*.”

Harry screamed and his power erupted.

Beams of furious blue light shot skywards out of his sword like bolts of lightning. So hot and so intense that Harry's skin burned. He turned the sword towards the swelling ranks before him – row upon row of crimson eyes – and cut into the heart of them.

Bolts of power went shearing off his blade, hissing across the ground and arcing wildly. These exploded with devastating force that washed over Harry harmlessly, but turned to dust the Destroyers.

Thrusting his sword down into the black stone at his feet, rivulets of power crackled across the ground, leapt in widening arcs over and

through the lines of screaming Destroyers. Harry kept his head bowed; his arms wrapped around his sword, and poured nothing but raw energy into the blade – pushing it beyond limits of thought and reality.

The blade was hot, hotter than any sun or star. Harry felt the heat, but it did not hurt him.

Thousands, hundreds of thousands, of orbs and bolts of darker fire were fired back at him from the Destroyers. Pale, useless things that Harry's power singed out of existence. Thin tendrils of the calm, almost beautiful light, shot out and annihilated the Destroyer's strength.

Before it had begun, as soon as they had sensed the Darkslayer, these Destroyers knew they were damned.

Wherever he was in death, on the edge of the realm that we are all doomed to tread, Harry had lit up the world beyond anything that it had ever seen before.

And still, he poured more and more power into his sword.

He was power.

His consciousness was inside every tendril of light, every river of blue liquid magic and scarily hot power. And he was inside the scarred and barely breathing human body that still knelt hunched in the epicentre of the furious storm. Harry was everywhere, along all the power that fuelled his fires and inside his own head, screaming for it to end.

God gave you a gift, Harry, Ethan said. And He also gave you free will. Do not mind Allarius – he's still bitter about that time you defeated him – but respect your power nevertheless. You do right and wrong with it... why, you're only human.

Am I? What are you?

Harry's thoughts there were felt, more than heard, and Ethan fell silent with no answer for one or the other.

In one fluid motion, Harry stood up, wrenched his sword from the stone and swung it before him with the calm, handled-ease of a blade master. Bursts of power, half circles of rippling light, flew from the cuts in the air the sword made and rent asunder the long lines of devastated Destroyers.

Far off in the distance, a hundred miles, Harry's leaping and bounding power tore up the horizon, doing its dread work there, on the very sharp edge of the way into True Death.

He was stronger here than he had ever been back home, in the mortal worlds.

Stronger, and also less bound by the feelings of regret over the destruction he caused. What did it matter, everything *good* here had already died?

Still at the centre of the maelstrom, Harry wondered if Sirius Black had walked this way after falling through the veil. He would have been still alive, like he was, but with no means to get back. Harry had means – he could tear open the sky, rend a hole back. Sirius would be long dead now, though, having died in death.

This place would eventually destroy all things that arrived here living – that was its purpose.

It is an arm of the Ways of Twilight, Harry thought. A part of them, just like every level of existence is a part of them. Here, the rules are backwards – here being alive is death, opposite are switched... and the Ways are open.

Suddenly Harry had no doubt that he could follow this path through death and once again reach the rose-studded realm that was the

keystone of all

Creation. Again, he could climb the stairs into the room with the doors of everything, and again he could feel the utter lack of a guiding hand – of a Creation that had lost its Creator.

A feeling that, whether they recognised it or not, every creature in existence felt. Some had belief, faith, but their prayers went unheard. They were praying to something that no longer existed, that had disappeared.

An acrid, black and oily smoke was rising from the mountain of corpses left behind by the departing Destroyers. Just like the Destroyers themselves, this cloud of greasy smoke was conscious, sentient – it hated Harry with every fibre of its being, and threw its power against him.

“Look out, Harry,” he said to himself, as the cloud shot through the air towards him like an arrow – a thick, powerful arrow – and struck him in the chest.

Harry was hurtling backwards through the air, clutching his sword and watching the stars – for there were stars now – flicker by one after the other.

Alien constellations, lights that held souls and the forgotten. He was about to hit the ground very hard.

Only he didn't.

White light – that same soul light of the stars – caught him. The souls of the dead that had stood behind him as he decimated the Destroyers became one, a cloud of power in their own right, and caught Harry in their gentle arms.

Beings – not all human, not by far – from countless worlds and faiths, lives and universes – all recognised the Darkslayer for who and what he was.

The guiding light in the War for Creation. The Last Hero.

The vapour of the souls cushioned Harry's fall and he hung suspended in the air on the arms of the dead. Azure light, twilight, rippled through the long cloud and dew drops of crystal fell to the ground, where they became the petals of the white rose.

And like a wave surging towards the shore, the souls pushed forward, with Harry at their lead, against the black cloud of tainted evil rearing up before them. A monolith of hate and destruction, billowing poison furiously bent against the Darkslayer, against hope.

You're doing good, kid, Ethan said, and Harry thought he heard awe in his voice. The souls of the dead were helping him, fighting against the future – which belonged to the Destroyers at the moment.

Harry twirled his sword in his right hand, the blade cutting harmlessly through the azure cloud beneath him and trailing smoke from the same out into the air. The stars themselves were sending down light to aid Harry as he went for the killing blow.

"Slowly, so slowly, I came to war," Harry whispered. He was no longer concentrating on the sword, but caught beneath his own mind. The blade of the Darkslayer would do its own work. "Twilight roses broke my fall.... On my way to war, just like before. You've seen it all, now watch me fly."

The wave of souls crashed and hurled Harry up, spinning him through the air and *into* the black cloud. It was like a vacuum in the heart of the cloud, and Harry could no longer breathe. Unlike the soul light, the edge of his sword delivered powerful, fatal blows against the cloud.

Spiralling through the cloud, lost in darkness, pain stabbing his every nerve, Harry cut out its heart – or whatever passed for a heart in this thing – and broke out through the other side. From his sword more white rose petals fell from the drops of light that dripped from the blade. Whenever one of these petals touched the dark cloud, it sizzled and burned, overwhelmed the darkness and extinguished the mist from existence – blasting it beyond even death.

Still riding the thrust of the souls, Harry flew higher into the sky, towards the stars that shone in his eyes.

“Why white roses?” he wondered. “*What* are they? Why do they do what they do?”

There was no answer to his question from anyone or anything. Not even Ethan. He was strangely silent, but Harry sensed he knew something he wasn't saying.

Gravity still worked in death, and Harry arced back down towards the glowing ground. Ripples of light, like on water, covered the vast expanse of the soul plains – a residue of Harry's power. Superheated earth, broken stone and fused rock ran for miles in every direction, save back towards life – though that was all relative.

Screaming tendrils of debris, remnants of the dark cloud, shot by Harry as he slowly fell towards the ground. The wind howled in his ears, pushed his hair flat against his head, and he gripped his sword ever tighter for fear of losing it.

He'd won another battle, and now a light that wasn't his own was seeping across the field, sweeping across the trapped souls, healing the wounds inflicted by the Destroyers and yes, Harry's power.

All was light – darkness faded – and with the Destroyers gone he saw this road to death as it should be, as it always was, light and carefree – no demons guarding the path to eternal rest.

Harry blinked and he stood on the ground. Completely clean of sweat and grime, and wearing a silk white robe that was almost too bright to look at, he sensed the presence of another, of something he had met before. Something that wasn't his enemy, depending on how one looked at it.

All around him the souls of the dead surged onwards, free of the

Destroyers, and seeking their way into True Death beyond the horizon, towards the twilight, and forever.

<Greetings, Darkslayer>

Harry spun... and then turned again, back the way he had been facing. There stood Death, that hooded figure in robes as dark as the darkest night, carrying a scythe that was coated in stardust, the long blade sparkling with the light of a million universes.

Once before had Harry met this figure – this embodiment of the end all mortals, all beings were doomed to face. A force of infinite patience, biding its time as all things faded away and entered its realm. Death himself, looking exactly like Harry expected him to. Of course, not everyone saw death as the Grim Reaper, but that was how he looked to Harry.

“Howdy, Death,” Harry sighed, and offered a rough salute.

There will come a time, Darkslayer, when it will not only be wrong, but useless to resist me, Ethan whispered, a shadow in his mind. Be very, very careful, Harry.

<You cleansed my realm of the Enemy. For that, I thank you. I myself cannot give death, merely shepherd it.>

“Happy to do the grunt work,” Harry said. “You can repay me by helping me find... someone important to me. A girl, ‘bout so high, red hair. Name a’ Ginny.”

<Last we met, your power tore my scythe from your chest – saved your life, barred you to death.>

“I remember,” Harry replied, rubbing his chest through the white robes.

<You defied me – you have defied all the powers of Creation. You defy reason!>

Harry grinned. "Did you just make a joke, Death?"

<You had dreams on your quest, and felt chills across your spine since the time you defeated the demon Allarius. At the time, you suspected I was following you across existence towards the Ways of Twilight.>

"Was I wrong?"

<No, you were right. I was following, in the shadows. My attention was drawn to you after your power fought back the Enemy of the Creator. After you destroyed Evil itself, and rent a universe apart to do so.>

Harry nodded. "In my dreams... I was playing chess against an unseen opponent. Shrouded in dark cloud... I never knew who or what it was."

<It was I. Do you recall what I told you of the human race?"

Harry shook his head, absently rubbing his scar and casting his mind back. He didn't recall. "No... I'm afraid it was another reality ago, another time... before Twilight."

<I said: *'That you, Harry Potter, that humans... if you were not so constantly challenged to merely survive, you would have died out billions of millennia ago. You excel when facing adversity, and would perish in this peace and comfort you long for.'* I still believe that.>

Be very careful, Ethan muttered. *Be beyond very careful.*

<I promised you that one day I would guide you to the otherworld, but you have come here alive. Broken yet another rule, another foundation of creation. You are as much a Destroyer as those recently banished.>

"I am *nothing* like them. I do what I do to survive, to help everything survive. Now, Death, answer me one question...." Harry paused, surveying the shadowy reaper with a thoughtful, pensive look upon his face. "What are you?"

Death laughed – Harry was sure of it. He didn't hear it, nor feel it, but it was there, hiding in the shadows just the same.

<I am that which came After. A power not of Creation, but *for* it.>

“After what?” Harry asked, although he thought he knew.

<After the Beginning.>

“Of... of Creation? You were the first thing created after Time and Space began?”

<No. I came from before the universes, before *this* Creation. I was the Creator's emissary, his Right Hand in the war against the Enemy.>

Harry took a deep breath. Here was a creature from beyond the beginning of Creation – from the Beginning of everything *before* Creation. In that vast nothing of the void, of nothingness, did creation ignite, at the hand of a Creator. But that meant....

“His enemy. The Enemy....” Harry whispered. “The Creator’s enemy followed Him into this creation then, seeped in and mired through the bowels of every universe, every level of creation. Dear Merlin, we were doomed from the start.”

<NO!> Death roared. <No. You had hope from the start, from the first second of relative time you had *choice*, and the covenant of free will. The Creator gave you life, He gave you fate, and destiny. He gave His creation the Darkslayer!"

Harry clicked his teeth together, not trusting himself to respond to that just yet. He feared killing Death at that moment. Finally, after a long silence, he growled a few words... “I was never given a choice,” he whispered.

<You were—>

“NO! You talk of giving creation choice, and free will, and then you speak of fate and destiny. If we’re all bound by those two bastards then how can anything we do matter? How can anything we do be a *free choice*?”

<You creations are not all bound by fate and destiny. Only the truly great....>

“And where is the Creator now?” Harry spat, his anger deep and intolerable. “His enemy is here, ready to destroy His creation, so where is the *great* and *powerful* God?”

<He is lost....> Death whispered, and there was unmistakable grief in his voice. <At the moment of creation, when there was light, the Enemy rose up and struck Him down. Had He wavered and defended Himself, then creation would have failed from the start. He bore the blow and was lost for it.>

“Then the Enemy won,” Harry said. “There’s no God, no higher being, to protect us. The Destroyer *won*.”

<There is the Darkslayer.>

Harry sighed and looked down at his hands, at the scars that ran across his fingers and knuckles. He could still feel his old leg, even though a metal one was in its place now. It was a phantom limb.

“You say lost... but do you mean destroyed? Was the Creator destroyed?”

Ethan shivered in Harry’s mind, and shied away from that question.

<I... every second of existence that passes further convinces me that He was destroyed. That the Enemy struck Him down, and annihilated Him at the Beginning of Creation. But I wonder... always wonder. The Creator I knew was resilient. Mayhap He still lives, shattered across infinity and eternity, lost amongst white roses and twilight, unable to go

on.>

“And the Darkslayer,” Harry said. “Why?” That one word said more than a million others ever could.

<At the moment of His downfall, I believe the Creator devised of a warrior. Of an Heir. Not any one creature, but a belief, and an ideal, suited for one strong enough to bear it. He knew He would be cast down for Creation, and so created a protector.> Death paused here, and appeared deep in thought. <An element of power *inside* creation that, at the right time, would rise up to combat the Enemy in some final, unimaginable, battle.>

“Well... shit,” Harry stated. “And this power chose me? Again, why?”

<For Defiance and Soul,> Death said. <You were never the Darkslayer before leaving your own world one hundred years ago. Up until then you were just another human, a survivor, and in every other world that exists your story did not diverge from your main world. You, Harry Potter, are the only man ever to survive constant universal travel. You awakened the Destroyer, Allarius, and in so doing awakened the power of the Darkslayer. It *chose* you. The Design of the Creator chose you as its host.>

Harry recalled that Death had tried to kill him, tried to stop him at the Ways of Twilight. Why would he do that if, as Death said, he was destined to fight the Enemy?

“You wanted me dead.”

<I... did not know what I do now. You were called Darkslayer then, but there have been millions of false prophets over the aeons, human or not. Your command at Twilight, however, marked you as the true Darkslayer – and the fear the Enemy holds for you convinced me of your nobility. You are the Darkslayer, Harry Potter. Power of the Creator.>

Worlds and wars were spinning in Harry’s mind. Everything the Dark had

ever thrown against him was making sense, everything that explained why he existed was slowly being revealed. He was chosen as the saviour of Creation, by a... a *design*, made by the Creator, who was struck down at the moment of Creation – when there was light.

“And...” Harry cleared his throat. “And where does Voldemort fit into all of this?”

Death shimmered in the twilight and Harry felt him turn away, although the image of the Reaper didn’t move at all.

<Voldemort has the power of the Darkslayer... you are his opposite in every way, and his equal. You have your power, and so does he. But twisted... unclean... outcast by the powers of the Grand Design. He cannot be killed. His existence has reached beyond Creation, and into that realm that never existed from I, the Creator, and the Enemy first came. He has become a being that wasn’t in the Creator’s Design, and he cannot be destroyed.>

Harry blinked. “Why not?”

<I have tried,> Death whispered. <Lord Voldemort know longer lives, and he no longer dies. He is a wrong, a curse, a blight to the will of the Creator. Such a creature would, of course, become the commanding force of the Enemy.>

Harry had a thousand questions that needed answering. But at that moment, as a few solitary stars winked overhead in the twilight sky, none seemed more important than the one at the front of his mind. The stars that circled worlds long forgotten, that *could* have existed, in another time, another place, another creation, disappeared as he spoke.

“What is the Enemy?”

Death hesitated before speaking, Harry was sure of it. He sensed indecision, pain, and even fear from the Grim Reaper. But speak he did, <A creature from the place before Time, before Creation. The Enemy,

Harry Potter, *your Enemy*, is the opposite power to the Creator.>

“<Everything has an opposite.>” Harry and Death spoke as one.

Harry began to laugh. He couldn't help himself. Laughter soon turned to tears, tears he had been unable to shed for Ginny and the wars he fought.

Here he had discovered the Truth, the ultimate, unchangeable truth of Creation and Life, Death and Time, and he couldn't have cared less.

“Allarius...” he whispered. “All the pain and regret, anger and violence, in Creation is the work of the Enemy, of the Creator's opposite. I've been fighting a God for over a century!”

Death stabbed his scythe down into the white marble floor. <What is a God?> he asked. <What is the measure of a God? A Creator, an Annihilator, or a greater power than one's own? If the last is true then you yourself are a God, Harry Potter. For your power matches that of the Enemy.>

And at that, Harry had heard enough. *He didn't want to know any more secrets of WHY!* It was too much.

“I'm only human,” he whispered.

<Yes, *human*. Evolved into the Grand Design for one purpose – to combat the dark. No other race in this, or any world, was born with such defiance, with such *soul*. You humans are, in my opinion, the champions of Creation.>

At the very least, humanity is all creation has now.... Ethan sighed.

<From now on you see the world without rules, without boundaries or streams, Harry Potter. From this moment forth you are the single most important man in all of this burning magnificence. You have fought harder than any to survive, to save existence, and in so doing you truly became the Darkslayer. I bow to you, Potter. You are... the Rightful Heir

to Creation.>

“No,” Harry said in response to *that*. “Hell, no.”

Behind Death other beings appeared. Beings and creatures of all shapes and sizes, aliens, human-like species, forms of pure energy, small magical folk and beasts that Harry considered monsters and animals. All behind Death, a representative of *every* race in Creation. Countless billions, stretching out over the horizon that didn’t exist into twilight.

Beyond billions, beyond trillions, beyond count. Life from everywhere, and everything – even in its most basic form.

And as one, they fell to their knees before Harry, saluting the Darkslayer – the Hand of God, and the Rightful Heir to His Creation.

Just when you thought it couldn’t get any bigger, Ethan said. *Damn, Potter!*

“I don’t... don’t want...” Harry struggled to speak. Death himself was bowing. “I just want Ginny back; nothing more, and nothing less.”

<You, Commander Potter, are being given leadership of the Dead Legion. Lord Darkslayer, you are given Creation. As steward for the Creator, I bequeath the Mark to the Rightful Heir.>

“NO!” Harry roared, but it was too late.

The back of his hand was burning, the flesh sizzling, and a mark appeared there – a Light Mark. The Mark of Twilight.

It was a white rose, and it soon spread from his palm down his arm until the long, emerald stalk, dotted with thorns, wrapped itself around his entire limb up to the shoulder. The bud, the flower itself, bloomed on the back of his hand. Crystal white petals that glittered silver and sparkled with drops of white power. The Mark was weeping, feeling the pain of

Creation.

<It is done, my Creator,> Death gasped. He spoke to the stars, to the being that had been struck down for His creation. Whether or not he still lived, in some way or form, didn't matter. Death had done his duty.

Harry was on his knees, his fist clenched before him in his lap. He held his Marked left arm with the hand of his right, staring with what could have been calm or disbelief at the tattoo of tremendous strength and power.

Ethan was awed into silence, fleeing to the vast far reaches of Harry's mind.

"I'm going to wake up," Harry said, to himself. His voice echoed with new power across the vast expanse of this realm. Heard by the countless beings before him, the souls of the dead from everywhere in Existence. "I'm going to wake up, and I'll be at the Dursley's, locked under the stairs – eleven years old and never going to Hogwarts. Ah, hell, I'm awake."

<Creation is yours to command, Lord Darkslayer. You are needed more than ever as the Enemy rises.>

"Shut up," Harry hissed. He still held his arm close to his chest. *"Silence... I need... quiet."*

Oh, but there was no peace for Harry now. He could feel the world, every world, in a way he had never before. His magic had, in the past, made him aware of the boundaries and the streams of time that ran through all of Creation. At times, he had felt the vastness, the utter incomprehensible size of Existence... but never like this.

He was one with the Creator's Dream, with the mind of it all. With Life, and with Death, and all that was in between. And it hurt.

He could feel the pain that Existence laboured under at all times. It was

massive, unbearable, he'd surely die – it would kill him and then Creation would fall because he wouldn't just die, no... no, no, no, no – He'd be blasted beyond even Death, erased from time and space, and Creation itself forever and—

Harry stood up, unconsciously shutting out the feelings of pain and misery that wracked his body and mind. Shut out Existence. It was still there, on

the edge of his mind. He could feel the Enemy in every aspect of *his* Creation. Could feel the Destroyers and every opposite force to Good, to the

White Rose, to Twilight, to the True God and Creator, who had paid with His existence for a dying Creation.

“When this is over,” Harry spoke to Death – the Eternal, ever-lasting being that had followed the Creator so very long ago. “When this is over, you will undo this.” He held up his glowing arm to the masses of Existence. “You will undo this....”

<Perhaps... should you survive,> Death whispered.

“What is the Dead Legion?” Harry asked, but he thought he knew.

<Your mark – the White Rose – will draw the souls who serve the Twilight to fight for you, on one side of the abyss or the other. An army stronger and more powerful than any to have ever existed. To call them, you must enter True Death.>

“I just came for one soul,” Harry whispered, and his voice wavered. He felt drained – physically, mentally, emotionally. Only his magic remained strong, bolstered by the strength of Creation that now flowed through his veins. “You know, it ain't easy being me.”

<You are who you were born to be – the Darkslayer. Let the Enemy tremble before your might!>

Harry cast his hand over the white robes and they changed, becoming

leather pants and a tight fitting black shirt. Sturdy, steel-capped boots covered his feet. A sheath appeared strapped to a chest holster on his back, and into that Harry placed his sword. The Mark shone ever brighter on his arm, and power jumped between his eyes.

The lightning bolt scar upon his forehead burnt like a fiery brand.

Let the Enemy tremble before your might, Ethan said.

Harry clenched his fists. “It will,” he whispered. “On the memory of the Lost Creator, I swear it will.”

[Chapter 27 – The Last Creation](#)

*And we’re glowing like the metal
on the edge of a knife!*

~~Meatloaf

“You are sure of this, Severus?” Dumbledore asked the potions master, seated as he was in his old familiar chair at Hogwarts. As always, the portraits of old headmasters dozed in their frames, and the myriad of weird and wonderful silver instruments did whatever they were supposed to do.

Snape scowled and sipped at the glass of amber coloured liquid he held between his shaking hands. That shaking was a betrayal – the pain hadn’t been that bad, only a little worse than usual. The firewhiskey burnt on the way down but it was a relief to the fire already burning in his throat – a sign of cruciatus abuse

“I am certain, Headmaster. The Dark Lord plans to bring these... these demons, that Potter spoke of, through into our world.”

Snape suppressed a shiver as he recalled the first meeting of all of the Dark Lord’s human servants in many weeks. Some thousands had crowded into the burning remnants of the muggle city Manchester, and some thousands had heard their Lord speak about the coming months.

Snape did not doubt that he wasn’t the only spy in the Dark Lord’s ranks, but – contrary to the past – the Dark Lord no longer seemed to care if his plans were known or not. As a member of the inner circle, Snape knew more than most, and more than he ever had.

That Voldemort was no longer human, he was certain. Just what he was defied belief, explanation. He was... less, ill. And supremely powerful. He had ordered the Death Eaters to stand guard soon, against the armies that would rise against him in the time it would take to bring through the millions of demons that would serve as the Dark Lord’s fodder for war.

“He wants to use the central plains of North America,” Snape continued, and then downed his remaining whiskey in one gulp, relishing the burn. “Soon – by the end of August. Again, he told everyone this, and again I believe it was the truth.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I do not know what concerns me more,” he said, eyes dwindling. “That which he intends to do, or that he no longer cares who knows of his plans.”

“He has also rescinded a previous order, Headmaster, concerning Potter.”

“Harry?”

“He is to be killed on sight – by any servant, and the same all those known to be close to him. No quarter – no mercy – is to be given. Granger and

Weasley follow close on his list behind yourself and Potter.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I can no longer provide extra protection for any of us, Severus,” he said. “We have reached the limit of protection wards through conventional magic.”

“And unconventional?”

“We are moving our command behind shields Harry has implanted in the Australian desert, and that Ronald is going to have installed beneath the wards here at Hogwarts. The new school year *will* begin on September 1st, as always.”

“And what of the demons?”

Dumbledore hesitated before speaking, casting his mind over information Severus was not privy to. Knowledge concerning the true identity of Godric

Gryffindor, who had acquiesced to be known simply as ‘Ric’ – a member of the Order and nothing more. Ron, Hermione and Dumbledore were the only three people on the planet who knew who he truly was.

And for now, it would stay that way.

“If they are truly as numerous as Tom believes they are, then our best hope lies with Harry. But he may not return in time...” *If at all*. “Harry’s army, the Legion of the Darkslayer, will be ready to move on North America come the time.” Here Dumbledore paused once again. “It may soon be time to choose one side forever, Severus. I trust you know where you belong.”

Snape barked bitter laughter. “I belong at Hogwarts, Headmaster.”

“As do I, my friend, as do I.”

At Hogwarts, where the war that now threatens the entire world first began, and perhaps where it will end. If end it will....

Lord Voldemort sat alone in the ramshackle old manor house once owned by his father – Riddle. It was here, going on two years ago, he had been reborn into something *more* than human, into something *more*.

At the time, he had been no stronger than before his downfall. But he had been alive again, and then all that changed when Potter once again survived the dreaded Avada Kedavra, once more defied death, and imparted some of his ethereal power into Voldemort.

The Dark Lord smiled; his eyes dim like fiery coals. Although he sat upon this world, in the velvet armchair by the old fireplace on the second floor of the Riddle House; although he was there, his mind stretched beyond such perceptions of reality and space time.

He was looking back at the Beginning, and at what Potter had done in another reality, across a different path and on *all* the worlds he and the mighty Darkslayer had existed. Frost, and dark roses, had sprung up out of the cracked floorboards around the Dark Lord – black roses plagued his footsteps now, and they were oddly comforting.

The roses were *real*, and that was enough.

The connection to Potter was still dead, as if the boy himself – no, man. Potter was old, a century old, and a man – as if the man himself had ceased to exist. As if he were dead.

But Potter wasn't dead.

Less than an hour ago the scar link had flared with emotion – Potter's emotion. Anger strong enough to break through whatever barrier separated the two of them now – Life and Death – had rippled into Voldemort's mind. Anger, shock, and more than a little fear.

And his power had grown.

Voldemort had felt it in himself, and for a few moments after the rush of emotion he had seen the wraith-like form of a black rose appearing and then fading on his left arm. Wrapped around the skeletal limb had been a tattoo, a Mark, of a black rose. It had been there, and then faded.

It still felt as if it were there.

Whatever it was, Voldemort knew without a doubt that Potter was at the heart of it.

Half glimpsed beyond time, Voldemort caught sight of the mighty Destroyer, of the Enemy, and saw himself in such a being of menace and pain. It made him smile. He was the Enemy, the *Annihilator*. Did that make Potter, who was undeniably his opposite, the *Creator*.

Perhaps it did, after a fashion....

Not that it mattered. Entropy had claimed the world, the universe, Existence itself. Whether Voldemort helped or not Creation was annihilating itself, and all that would be left would be a clean slate, where those beyond such mercies as life and death could recreate.

First this world, Voldemort thought. *Then every world.*

He had all the time of eternity to conquer Creation. For he stood outside of Life and Death now. He was the Enemy, the apotheosis of all destruction.

And there was an awful lot of existence to destroy, and with only one true foe in the whole burning mess of it, Voldemort could already taste victory.

Hellfire, Voldemort, Harry cursed, swiping a hand across his forehead.

By all that is holy, what are you?

Harry's arm burnt with pain so pure, so righteous and clear that it almost went beyond pain – and into bliss. But the burning couldn't be ignored, and it was that which drew Harry's mind back towards his new power, his new role, and his new title.

Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, the Darkslayer and the Rightful Heir to Creation.

In his mind there was a tight and irresistible *pulling* sensation. He could feel Creation, feel Existence and the unbelievable pain and misery that it was in. And all those feelings, all those aches and wounds, could be traced back to one source.

Harry followed the threads and strings – the webs – that were now linked across all of eternity and infinity in his mind. His anger grew as he followed the trail of evil and destruction to its source. Many worlds and many miles flickered across his inner eye. He felt life bloom and end on all of these worlds – not *end*, really, so much as change.

And he felt *the Design*. The Creator's Legacy, His plan for Creation, the overall goal for Existence. He felt it... but as for comprehending and understanding it... Perhaps he wasn't meant to, not yet – maybe not ever.

Harry followed the lines through his mind and his anger reached its peak when he reached the other side of the coin, the evil that festered in the heart of *his* Creation, and found that he knew it. The Enemy... was his enemy.

He saw Voldemort, seated before a dead fireplace in a room where black roses grew like weeds through the cracks in the floorboards. All the threads of desecration were spawned from him, and the thick black cords of that poison were strengthening with each passing second.

Strengthening as... as it ate away Creation.

“Enough....” Harry rasped, and shut off the powers that surged through him, closed his mind to existence. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and looked around the ‘room’ he stood in with a frown creasing his forehead. It was almost a permanent feature of his face these days.

<You can no doubt feel the decay and loss spreading with every beat of your heart,> Death whispered, standing on his right. <Feel the sorrow of—>

“I don’t care....” Harry sighed. “Not as I should, Death, not as I should... You chose a poor heir for the hope of the future.”

<You care... you care so much it hurts.>

Harry thought he heard uncertainty veiled under Death’s otherwise neutral tone.

The ‘room’ that they both stood in could have been any room in any normal world across all of the mortal universes. There were several windows, of which sunlight poured through, panelled walls with floral wallpaper and an array of wooden furniture. A long bookcase stretched across one wall, around the corner along another, and broke only for the windows.

There were no doors.

A chair and a table were sitting in the centre of the room – wooden chair, wooden table – of a beech colour and upon it, floating above it, was a globe of the world. It spun slowly, as if it had all the time in the world, and a faint glow spilled out onto the table. Swirls of murky cloud stretched across its calm surface.

Harry rubbed his tired eyes. Those sparkling emeralds were dull and dross, sore and bloodshot.

“Where is this world?” he asked, absently rubbing the stem of the rose

tattoo down his forearm. "It's not quite home."

<No, not your birth-world, but one of the many worlds that it could have been.>

"The continents are all misshapen... and dark. What happened here?"

<Don't you know?>

Harry stared at the spinning orb, and before he could stop it his mind opened once again through the rose tattoo – the Mark – and he knew without a doubt what had happened to this world. It was polluted, and dead, and barren. The force of the Enemy, of evil and dark, had claimed this world, like so many others before it, and this time its form had been nuclear war.

"Isn't it enough," he began, holding his hand over his eyes. Images of lives exploding and ending, civilisations obliterated, and the sky itself aflame with poisonous clouds of manmade destruction. "Isn't it enough that I live every day in the shadow of this chaos, do I now have to see where it has destroyed beyond my sight?"

<You are no stranger to the Enemy. More so now will you be on his mind. As the Rightful Heir, you stand to purge the taint of the Enemy from

Creation, and send it back into the abyss of nothing. It is of no greater importance to the Lord of Darkness that you be destroyed. It, *he*, will be throwing all the might of his power against you.>

"And that will be different from the rest of my life... how?"

Death fell silent and the dead orb upon the table disappeared. Although it didn't seem like it, the room was moving – moving at a rate an infinite time faster than the speed of light, and moving not at all.

Such rules as those of physics ceased to matter beyond the realities of mortal comprehension.

Harry and Death were moving across the border between the end of life and the realm of True Death, where the Dead Legion waited to be called into service, to battle the marshalled forces of the Destroyers – Voldemort's (the Enemy's) arm of war.

"Are we in the afterlife yet?" Harry asked.

Death's scythe, coated in stardust, cut through the air in the room and revealed a sparkling silver bridge as clear as crystal. The 'room' faded into night, and then was gone entirely. One by one, foreign stars winked into existence overhead, and a mist of silver light swept across Harry's shins.

"Now this... looks familiar."

Death nodded... at least, Harry felt him nod. <You have stood on this bridge once before, Commander Darkslayer, the High Lord of Crea—>

"Call me Harry or nothing."

<....You nearly died, many years ago in the other reality. Your spine was snapped, your soul torn from your body by a surge of strength sent down the scar link by Voldemort. L—Harry... this is the Last Bridge between life and death. There is no turning back to the mortal realms after this.>

Harry nodded. He remembered it the way we sometimes remember dreams years after we dream them. A half-glimpsed thought, a half-forgotten memory buried in past persuasions of a sight gazed through the relativity of a unique mind.

"Sirius Black... my godfather. He stood here with me and...."

<Yes?>

Harry let out a long, tormented sigh. "He told me that nothing was impossible. He convinced me to keep on living, although he knew it was

going to be hard.” Harry laughed. “How’s that for understatement?”

<You are still alive.>

“Am I?”

Ghostly imprints of Harry’s boots faded in the glass as he stepped across the bridge. He didn’t feel entirely at ease, and as such kept his hand ready on the hilt of his sword above his shoulder. Years of sneaking and training made his movements soundless. Death was merely his shadow.

There were no enemies here.

After a time Harry became sure of that, and let go his sword.

“Tell me more about where the Enemy and the Creator... and you, come from, Death,” Harry whispered. His voice echoed across non-existent voids and walls, reverberated through the crystal bridge and disappeared.

<A place of nothing... Harry. Another failed creation and the last battleground for the Eternal War. It no longer exists, and never did, never will. Time ended there, so light failed, and all was washed away.>

Harry paused. “You said another failed creation?”

<I did... your creation, Harry, was not the first made by the Creator, but it may be the last....>

Harry tried to wrap his mind around that and found it hard, in contrary to everything he already knew. “There was something before nothing? A creation before Creation?”

<The memories are dull to me, Lord D—Harry. It was so very long ago... but I remember the *Design* well, if not its purpose, if not why. This Creation, didn’t always exist, and yet it did. It had to, or nothing would

have been everything, and time and space wouldn't have merged....>

"But there was a creation with other poor bastards, other worlds, other universes and a myriad of other weird and wonderful things *before* this one?"

<There was – there have been many.>

"How is that possible?"

Death stopped Harry then, and did something that would have killed him for sure before the transformation and the Mark. Death clapped an invisible hand on his shoulder, held his scythe in the crook of his arm and said:

<You do not yet grasp the scale of the war that has been fought since the Beginning – the Dawn of the Creator and of the First Time, Harry. You are now leader of the resistance against an Enemy that has corrupted and destroyed every creation the Creator, your God, has built since He came into being.>

"And how many is that....?"

Death turned away and the two of them continued walking across the silvery bridge, towards the true end of life. <Infinity is too short a time to count the number of creations lost in the Eternal War. I, Death, have claimed far too many souls....>

Harry's thought followed the inevitable path towards the end he now knew was all too possible. "But this time," he said. "This time, there won't be another creation if the Enemy wins – if Voldemort beats me. Because there's no Creator... He was struck down and...."

<And gave His last creation the Darkslayer,> Death finished. <Understand, Harry; you have been given a legacy that reaches far back into the beginning of the First Creation, and now here you are, all but alone before the might of the Enemy so many creations later. After

infinity, and eternal battle, the last war against the Enemy will be fought soon, and this time it counts for all.>

Harry chuckled mirthlessly. “No pressure, huh?”

<I am the last, Harry, the last of the First. In the Beginning, there were others. Fate, Destiny, Time, Life... there were many more and they were all conscious beings like myself, all forces of power in the next creation, but now I am the last.> A feeling of time so stretched across forever gripped

Harry and he saw how small he really was. <In the end, only Death survives... even Hope was destroyed by the Enemy. She was a kind soul, in her way. Without the Creator’s might we have dwindled to nothing and now all I can offer in the Last Battle is an army of souls, of my Dead.>

Harry saw that the stars were gone, and that a shadow of darkness had reached out over the mist to block away all light and life. They were finally entering True Death, and all that lay beyond.

“I’m not going to lose, Death,” Harry said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “I don’t have faith in the Creator, and rightly so... but...”

<But?>

Across Harry’s eyes, through his hair, jumping over his skin and through his fingers, blue sparks of power sparked in and out of existence. A small display of the still completely untapped power that rested inside of him.

“But,” Harry smiled. “But the Creator has faith in me. That’s why I was chosen as the Darkslayer, because the Creator’s *Design* saw in me what it would take. I don’t claim to be a hero, or much of anything, but His hand – God’s Hand – has been more present in this, His last creation, than you think.”

<How can that be?>

Harry winked and tapped his nose, then pointed his finger at Death. "Because I think He's alive, buddy." He laughed. "Our Creator is alive – somehow, in some way I haven't yet figured out He still exists... but just wait 'til I tell Hermione about this. She'll have an answer within five minutes, and if not then I owe you a beer."

Only you would speak to Death himself like that, Ethan chuckled. *God love you, Harry. Don't ever change.*

You ready to see everyone again? We're about to. The you from my world is in here, you know.

In a way, I am the me from your world – if that makes any sense. And I am the me from my world.

Harry thought about that. *Are you anything more, Ethan?*

I know what you're thinking, and no, Ethan smiled. *I'm not that – you're just too paranoid.*

Its not paranoia if they're really out to get you....

*British Ministry of Magic
Twilight Technology Department
August 26th*

Hermione walked briskly down the modern corridor that had been designed in stark contrast to the more ornate and grand stone hallways of the other departments in the Ministry.

Clear unmarked white walls stretched down out of sight and branched off around corners. Steel furniture had been placed against the walls and every so often a clear glass window looked out upon the false weather created by magic to help convince workers that they were not working

several hundred feet underground.

And again in stark contrast to the ultra-modern, almost muggle, design, all of the personnel – the wizards and witches – were dressed in dark blue trousers and jackets; with a row of silver metal buttons secured right up to the throat. On the left breast the symbol of this new department cut down in a familiar jagged form.

An azure lightning bolt.

Not dressed in the standard uniform for the Department of Twilight Technology, Hermione wore a simple black skirt and white blouse. Her hair was tied back as best she could keep it and tucked under one arm, as always, was a file of papers and reports. And following her, again as always, were a series of aides and advisors from the Order, the Twilight Guardians, the Australian Ministry, the Believers of Twilight... and that was about it.

Gazing left and right as she passed rooms with busy magical technicians pouring over dozens of different devices, all formed and utilised from the rolls upon rolls of parchment of advanced technology Harry had stored into his head at the Ways of Twilight. Hermione still felt slight awe at the speed that this operation had been assembled, and that she had been a part of it.

Just under two weeks ago now she had spoken to Dumbledore about fully utilising the awesome array of advanced weaponry and technology sitting almost uselessly in Harry's trunk, in the back room of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. It hadn't taken much to convince Fred and George that this department was where their talents could be of most use.

"Miss Granger! Miss Granger!"

Hermione turned on the spot and came face to face with the Engines Officer – the man in charge of what could be the most delicate project – and offered him a rare smile. These days there was less and less time to smile. Working eighteen hours a day, keeping an army afloat and a war

running was a fulltime job – almost to the point of stupidity.

“Mr Richardson,” Hermione nodded at the befuddled man.

He was short and fat, was Richardson; with a curling moustache that he had a habit of twirling like a 1930s villain who had just tied a damsel to the train tracks.

He just needs a cane and top hat, Hermione thought, and this kept the smile on her face a moment longer.

Strands of white hair slicked down with gel and combed over his balding head, and sparkling brown eyes hidden behind thin lenses made Richardson appear less intelligent than he was – made him seem permanently befuddled, lost. A muggle born wizard, Richardson was the leading authority in legally integrating magic into muggle appliances. He’d worked for many Ministries around the world in experimental technology.

“If you’ll excuse me, Mr Richardson,” Hermione said, with as much patience as she could. Time was always short these days – and every moment

that swept by further convinced her that Harry may not be coming back, that he had failed. “If you’ll excuse me, I must speak with the Weasley—”

“We’ve finished the first phase,” Richardson said, unable to suppress his excitement long enough for her to finish. “The incantations were sound, the metals perfect and the integration seamless. The first prototypes are so far performing magnificently.”

Hermione blinked and only allowed a second to pass in which she displayed her shock. “You’ve had only six days!” she exclaimed. “Mastering the magic alone should have taken....”

“We estimated the incantations would take us three weeks to understand and control,” Richardson said, waddling off down an adjacent hall with

Hermione right alongside. “We *thought* it would take us a month to complete the first prototype, and that was with round the clock shifts and more than a little luck. To tell you the truth, Miss Granger, until two days ago I thought we wouldn’t finish the phase one prototype for seven weeks – at best.”

Almost rushing down the halls buried deep within the Ministry, Hermione felt a flare of hope and excitement rush through her. *This* was progress, progress Harry would be proud of, and that would save lives.

“Then what changed?” Hermione asked. “From seven weeks to six days.”

Richardson was grinning but he looked unnerved, and more than a little scared. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead, and he absently dabbed at them with his jacket sleeve.

“Mr Richardson?”

“The magic wasn’t nearly as complex as it should have been,” he said, quietly and without much conviction. “It... well, it defies all laws of magical theory. It... it... the magic or... or *something*, wanted us to be able to do the spells. We didn’t work the magic, the magic worked through us.”

That Hermione didn’t have time to think about. She was simply too busy to think about it. A few months ago she would have devoted hours to solving this, but finding even five minutes to think about it these days would be next to impossible.

“I must ask again, Miss Granger, on behalf of everyone working here on all of the devices... where did the plans for this technology come from?”

Hermione jumped out of her thoughts and replayed the last few seconds in her mind. She shook her head. “Where do you think they came from, Mr Richardson?”

“Honestly?” Hermione nodded. “I believe they came from the future.”

“Magic can only manipulate time through the present and into the past, Mr. Richardson. That is one of the basic laws of magical theory.”

“Perhaps they were sent to us from the future, into the future’s past. The plans are far beyond anything we could have hoped to achieve, anything the muggles could achieve, within the next... five hundred years. And the complexity of the designs are explained in terms we can understand... they’re almost too perfect.”

Hermione sighed. “Yours is not to reason why, Mr Richardson. Perhaps one day, when we’re not at war, I’ll have Harry Potter explain to you where he happened upon this technology.”

“I more than suspected that man was involved in this,” Richardson smiled, and then didn’t speak again until they reached a glass door complete with chrome handle. “Very well, Miss Granger. We’re here... let me show you the future.”

Hermione knew what she was about to see, but it still sent a rush of exhilaration through her when Richardson opened the door and she stepped through into a large, open space with a ceiling only visible against the white paint of the walls by deep halogen lights that hung parallel to each other in a dozen long rows.

Rows of steel framed desks surrounded the perimeter and seated and standing around them were half a dozen technicians, dressed in their blue uniforms, and working on big metal circular structures and scores of open boxes of glowing power crystals – shining with a white radiance that was pure against even the blemish free walls.

And in the centre of the room, on a launch pad that stretched for thirty feet in every direction, was a large rectangle of welded titanium that hung, seemingly without aid, a few inches above the floor.

“It works,” Hermione said simply.

Moving across the room to the rectangle of metal, her gaggle of aids following close behind, Hermione smiled softly and then stepped up onto the levitating object.

“We’ve tested it up to one thousand metric tonnes. There was no give in the structure. The engine itself is on the underside and is roughly four feet in diameter.”

Hermione nodded. “Four feet,” she whispered. “That is extraordinary.”

Richardson beamed. “The next step is to attach a control column to the device, but it should be a simple matter to engineer that in. The technology already exists, it just means integrating it with the new equipment. Another week and we’ll be able to move this platform across any axis and to a height of... well, *any* height. These engines are space-worthy.”

That made Hermione gasp. “You’re serious? The twilight engine can be used for... for space travel?”

Richardson smiled. “I’ve taken it upon myself to design a space vehicle, a ship, worthy of these engines – as a side project. As it stands now, the main project of integrated airships is, in my professional opinion, complete in theory. As soon as we purchase a few design frames from Boeing we can begin customising our technology onto their hulls. Within a month you’ll have the first aircraft of the next generation.”

And it’ll be a warship, Hermione thought, with a sigh. *Why can’t it just ever be about human advancement, about science – why do we have to excel when it’s for war?*

To that there was no answer.

The London Times

ROYAL AIR FORCE ATTACKS ROYAL NAVY!

In the early hours of yesterday morning, before the dawn of the day and the light of the sun, the sky above the ship building town of Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria in the North was set ablaze with a surprise bombing by several dozen RAF fighter jets.

Authorities are at a loss to explain why over thirty of our jets were called to bomb seven of our largest warships. The Prime Minister, who hasn't been seen in public for some weeks, was unavailable for comment.

This attack comes on the heels of a worsening economic slump, of failing international relations, the nuclear explosion in Manchester, and of the surprise withdrawal of the United Kingdom from several of our most respected treaties and aid programs – including the United Nations.

The fleet was docked in Barrow for standard maintenance repairs over the month, and six of the seven HMS vessels now lie at the bottom of the sea, along with an estimated three thousand brave souls. The skeleton crew aboard the vessels.

At a time when the country needs him the most, the Prime Minister's continued absence is a cut too deep into the heart of the United Kingdom. Who will end the sorrow if not the elected government?

There are no more heroes in the world, and chaos runs rampant through even our armed forces. Is this the end of our civilisation? For if this isn't checked, and checked soon, everything would have been for nothing.

The Daily Prophet International

POTTER'S ARMY DESTROYING INFERI

Known in certain circles as the 'Twilight Army', Harry Potter has once again shown he is the only power in this world with enough strength of character to destroy that which is evil, in spite of international laws prohibiting foreign armies from entering foreign nations.

Photos and witness reports supplied to the Prophet reveal the devastating truth behind the wave of grave robberies across all of Europe and even into Russia and China. The Dark Lord Voldemort has been raising the dead on a scale never before known – calling thousands of Inferi into his service, and the only force that has engaged this desecrated army has been Potter's soldiers.

Shunned and feared throughout the world, Potter's ten thousand strong force has been deployed to the darkest corners of many lands, in which evil thrives and the light dares not tread. The Prophet does not think it an exaggeration to say that Potter has stopped the coming surge of dark creatures into the very heart of our communities.

Without Potter, the war would have been lost many years ago.

Knowing that there are those still willing to resist the pull of the Dark is reason enough to clear Potter of all 'apparent' wrongdoing. The International Confederation has labelled Harry Potter a war criminal, and more than one nation would see him dead.

That Potter still has the resolve to fight that which threatens

us all, even though the world has turned against him, is a display of what it truly means to be human.

And with reports from Africa about basilisk attacks along their coastlands, and other such dark incidents around the globe, hope in Potter may be all that the blind of this world can trust in.

<You once believed you despised the Creator, Harry,> Death whispered.
<Until very recently you believed He was your enemy.>

Harry shrugged. "My opinions may have changed, but not the fact that I am always right. I hated a God, just the wrong one."

A sprawling field of white roses spread across the horizon under a twilight sky ahead of Harry and Death. The roses weren't there, neither was the sky, but they were – and a winding yellow brick road cut through the field, and it was on this road that wasn't really there that Harry continued on, now submerged in the realms of the departed.

He was close to his end now – to Ginny. That much he could feel.

"You know," he spoke to Death. "The real trouble with this reality, with all realities, is that there's no background music."

Background music? Ethan said.

<Background music? I did not think things could get much worse.>

Harry laughed. "If you think things can't get worse it's probably only because you lack sufficient imagination, Death."

<Honestly, Harry, how did you survive this far?>

Harry grinned and stared down at the passing yellow bricks, and the odd rose petal that was blown across his path. *How did I survive it all?*

Haven't given that much thought.

"There's one golden rule that I've lived by for most of my life, Death, and it's because of this rule that most of Hell is filled with demons and worse – my enemies."

<What rule?>

"Never interrupt your enemy while they're making a mistake. *Never*. They all do it; you just have to keep your eyes open. Its how I'm going to get Voldemort... and now I have a question for you."

The sky was becoming darker once again with every advancing step Harry took towards the horizon. Contrary to what he knew reality could do, the horizon was getting closer. He felt that twilight would have blanketed the sky by the time he reached it.

<Only one?>

Harry shrugged. "I think it's an important one... but we'll see."

<Go ahead, Lord Darkslayer.>

Harry inclined his head as he walked, and a ghost of a smile played around the corners of his mouth. "Where do souls come from?" he asked.

"The lycanthropy cure is being mass-produced now, and the waiting list is falling dramatically."

Hermione nodded, seated across from the Ministry's leading potions expert in one of the three labs on this floor of the Twilight Department, she stifled a yawn and blinked around at the vials of purple liquid boiling over white hot flames. There were also several vials of a blue potion that

she couldn't identify.

"How many on the list?" Hermione asked.

"Some hundreds," the potions master said, scratching his stubbly beard. "But *not* every werewolf on the register – not those who are suspected to be serving the Dark Lord."

Hermione sighed. "So there are some who don't want the cure."

"That's what we've theorized, and as such we've found a solution to the problem itself – transmission of the disease."

"Oh?"

"The blue potions are a vaccine against the disease – not a cure. We can immunise the population against the bite, and with government backing market it through many mediums – food, water, injections and so forth – which will, given a few years, eradicate the disease."

Hermione smiled her approval, and behind her standing arrayed around the room one or two of her aids made a note of the cure for future reference.

"I assume you worked backwards from the cure provided by Harry Potter to create a vaccine."

"We did – the groundbreaking work Potter has done is way ahead of our time, but the avenues he's opened look set to change the way potion brewing is perceived through the new century. Potions that seemed impossible, like a cure for lycanthropy, are now very possible."

Hermione smiled sadly at that and the thoughts of Harry that it brought into her mind. *Harry's the kind of person who frowns at the impossible, and then shows you how it can be done.*

Across the complex and two floors up, Ron Weasley sat in a similar

meeting with Godric Gryffindor and the defence expert in the Twilight Technology offices. He had no idea that Hermione was in the same building and so close – for all he knew, she was once again at the compound in Australia, overseeing the production of food crops grown in the heart of the desert.

Ron was tired – almost to the point of exhaustion. He now knew how Harry felt every minute of every day, for he felt it himself, and had found new feelings of pity and anger for his best friend. Anger at a universe where these jobs were dumped on the young.

“Who must do the hard things, Ron?” Harry said, and moved his Knight to intercept Ron’s Bishop.

Ron shrugged. “You?”

Harry smiled and shook his head. “He who can, Ron – remember that. If you have the power to destroy the world, then you have to take responsibility for that power – remember that.”

“When did you get so wise, Harry?” Ron smirked.

“I’ve been taking lessons from Dumbledore.”

Ron fell out of his thoughts as Gryffindor, or Ric as he was known in public, spoke to the defence team working on the next generation of shields from Harry’s designs.

“Please explain it again,” Gryffindor said, gesturing to the long silver tubes sitting on the table before them. There were two, each about six foot long, and with glowing lights on either end.

The woman before Ron inclined her head and absently pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. For a moment Ron struggled to recall her name – she had only given it a minute or two ago – but his sleep deprived mind had been unable to hold onto it.

"These are only prototypes of the final design," the woman said, smiling excitedly. Gryffindor had a twinkle in his eye, gazing at the sticks, and Ron wished he had paid more attention to what they were.

Something to do with defence, in battle, and that was why he was here after all – so he and Gryffindor could plan strategies for full-scale war based on the best equipment and devices they had available. And with the resources of two powerful countries, not to mention Harry's wealth and knowledge, they weren't too bad off.

"One pole is placed, buried in the earth, on one side of a field, and the other is placed no more than two miles away on the other side." The woman had a scrap of parchment and she illustrated this, and then joined the two poles with a curving line of black ink. "This activates the shield, which is forty feet high and a quarter of an inch thick."

"We already have plenty of shield devices," Ron said, a little harsher than he had intended. He didn't want to insult or upset the woman, but his time was short, and he had been called down for this?

"I understand that, Mr. Weasley," she replied, a tad curtly. "But, I also understand, that you have nothing that can block the Killing Curse. *This* has the potential to do that."

"Potential how?" Gryffindor asked, eyeing the sticks once again. "I have lost many a friend to the Avada Kedavra."

"Who hasn't these days...?" Ron mumbled, thinking once again of Ginny. Her body was still encased within that white light before the fireplace at Grimmauld Place, as Harry had left her, but where was her soul – with Harry? It seemed impossible that it could be, but then Harry was the impossible.

"All known shields break, shatter, under the power of the Killing Curse," the woman explained. "Whether it be magical or physical, like a brick wall, nothing can withstand the green light – and that is what makes this shield so important."

“How does it work?” Ron asked.

The woman shrugged. “Well... it doesn’t – yet. But given another week or so and we’ll have a fully operational pair of rods. You see, the shield that is raised between the two rods, is a shield of the same green light of the Avada Kedavra. That is, a wall of the Killing Curse is spread out in a thin line across a radius of anything up to two miles.”

Ron was suddenly intrigued by the idea, as well as other possibilities utilising the same technology. He envisioned a wall of Killing Curses falling on an army of Death Eaters, and was ashamed to feel more than a little satisfaction at that. He pushed it away.

“You use the curse itself as a shield,” Gryffindor said. “That is genius.” The old wizard, the Guardian, smiled. The long scar across his cheek stretched against his face.

“The crystal sockets here and here.” The woman opened latches on the rods and pointed into empty clear space. “A crystal can be charged with a certain spell, such as the Avada Kedavra, and placed in these sockets. It could be any spell, but as I said when you arrived this is still all just theoretical. The hard part is going to be charging a crystal with the Killing Curse without destroying it.”

If it can be done... Ron mused. A lot of lives will be saved. And a lot of enemies destroyed.

“This should be your number one priority from now on,” he said. “I also want you to send the design over to the Weapons Lab. Unfortunately, you’ve laid the groundwork for a very powerful weapon.”

August 28th

Despite their age difference – and the fact that Gryffindor wasn’t *entirely*

human – he and Ron had become fast friends. As his role as a Guardian, Gryffindor had lived a very long time. His soul had never entered True Death, and wouldn't for some time. Of course, Guardians could be killed like anything else, and the mysteries of death were just that to Gryffindor.

Still, a thousand years was a long time to live, and Gryffindor knew that recently his thoughts had been turning more and more often towards dying, and the adventures that lay beyond such a journey. But if Potter didn't win this war in life, then there would be no death to die in – *nothing*, as Ronald had put it.

Thoughts of Ron made Gryffindor think of his life before mortal death, and his transcendence into Guardianship. Of that final battle with Salazar Slytherin at Stonehenge, and the death of his lifetime friend – William Artson. Although there had been many generations and branches of diverging family since that day, Gryffindor believed that Ron carried some of the blood of William.

Coincidences didn't exist, after all, and it made too much sense not to be true. Ron was Harry's best friend, Harry of the line of Gryffindor, and a thousand years after the first war of Slytherin had ravaged the world the last was shaping up to mirror the first – but on a much larger scale.

Would Ron die for some cruel poetic fate, at the hands of Slytherin – Voldemort?

By all that remained light, Gryffindor would not see it so.

The young shouldn't have to die for the mistakes of the old... but then, history has shown that the young usually do. No politician ever ordered himself into the trenches.

Seated next to Gryffindor around a round table in the Headmaster's study at Hogwarts, Ron yawned and looked around the room as the last few to arrive sat themselves down at the table. From his left sat Hermione, and

next to her was his father the British Minister, then Dumbledore, a scattering of Order members including Tonks and Remus, Snape, an advisor to Maggie Thorn, the acting-Minister of Australia, and a handful of other figures who acted as liaisons between the few Ministries that had secretly sided with Harry.

“Now that we are all here,” Dumbledore began, “let us cut straight to the heart of the matter.” Fawkes sat on the back of Dumbledore’s chair, surveying the room with his peaceful gaze and humming softly under his breath. His eyes were drawn particularly to Gryffindor. “One of our spies in

Voldemort’s ranks has informed me that Voldemort intends to move against us sooner than we anticipated.”

“How so?” Arthur Weasley asked.

“By the end of the month, before Hogwarts is reopened for the new school year, I have it on good information that Voldemort plans to summon an army of... demons, of dark magical creatures, from within a void between universes. A prison of sorts, for these demons.”

“You cannot be serious,” sneered one of the Ministry aides. “Tales of pretend to disguise the Dark Lord’s real aim – this castle. Our own spy reports that Hogwarts is under serious threat from a Death Eater attack.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Hogwarts is as protected as it can be, given the circumstances. But I assure you, Mr Gray, that these demons are not make-believe. They are real, and Voldemort can command them. We need to decide what to do about them, and fast. One million dark creatures erupting onto the earth will see the death of countless innocents, and to dismiss it as pretend will be the greatest mistake anyone has ever made.”

Mr Gray scowled and said nothing, for which Ron was very thankful.

“Do we know where these... demons are coming through?” Hermione asked, ever practical. “Or when? The end of the month is only a few

short days away. We are almost out of time.”

“Our spy,” Dumbledore said, not having to point a finger at Snape, “believes that the central plains of North America will be the beachhead for these demons. All Death Eaters are apparently being summoned there tomorrow, to protect Voldemort and his inner circle when he opens the world onto the void. A feat which will, thankfully, take some time to complete”

“And how long will that take?”

Dumbledore shook his head at Remus’s question. “It does not matter. We shan’t allow him to reach that stage of his goal. Arthur, the Aurors must be ready to portkey to the United States within an hour of the end of this meeting. Mr Gray, Miss Walsh, can we expect any aid from your Ministries?”

The two aides shook their heads. None had openly declared for Harry yet, and to do so would bring down the wrath of the entire world.

“No matter,” Dumbledore continued. “Australia will provide some hundreds of Aurors, and we have Harry Potter’s army. Eight thousand of those soldiers have enough training to fight and destroy these creatures. In fact, they have been trained specifically for it. The Twilight Guardians will also play a pivotal role over the next few days.”

“As will the technologies recently developed in the Ministry,” Gryffindor spoke up for the first time. “I have... a personal desire to see these demons thrown back into the abyss. But should they overrun our forces, then this war will end before August does.”

“What about Harry Potter?” Miss Walsh, aide to the Norwegian Ministry, asked. “If any of the reports about him are to be believed, then his power could considerably increase our chance of winning any battle – against demons or whatever.”

There was silence at that from those who knew about Harry, and those

who didn't but were very curious. Ron cleared his throat and said just a few short words. "Harry Potter won't be fighting this battle. He has other commitments, elsewhere... that are just as, if not more, important than this."

"Have the Americans been informed about this attack?" Mr Gray asked, directing his question towards Dumbledore, Ron, Hermione, Gryffindor and

Arthur. They were clearly the most informed of the group. "An invasion onto their soil would mean three to four thousand of their Aurors mobilised to fight with us."

Dumbledore wanted to sigh but he didn't. "The American Ministry cannot be trusted at the moment," he said delicately. "Sorcerer Rafter has been actively working against our involvement with Harry Potter for many months. If we let the Americans know we mean to move over ten thousand of our soldiers onto their soil, then we may just find three to four thousand American Aurors allied with the Death Eaters against us."

"Then what is the plan?" Tonks asked. "Hit 'em hard and hit 'em fast?"

Dumbledore waved his hand towards Ron and Gryffindor. "Our attack, or perhaps our defence, has been formulated by Ron and Ric. I will leave it to them to explain our offensive, should the worst happen and we find ourselves facing an army of furious demons."

Gryffindor began to outline the plan to the group, but Ron was once again lost in his thoughts.

If the worst should happen, he thought, then Merlin save us because nothing but total destruction of Central America could stop the flood of demons. And there are millions of innocent lives hanging in the balance there... God, Harry, how did you make these choices alone for so long?

Chapter 28 – IDSS/ISDS

*All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.*

~~Poe

“You know, once upon a time I thought that this war would kill me,” Harry said, swinging his sword around in his hand almost absently. “But I don’t think that anymore. It’s just going to grind me down, year after year, until I’ve nothing left. And it won’t end with Voldemort, will it, Death? No, there’ll be another madman, and then another – as long as I live.”

<You are a madman, are you not?>

Harry smiled. He was sitting upon a small boulder under a star strewn night sky that stretched over a field of the whitest roses. It was cold enough for dew drops to begin forming on the ethereal petals, glistening in the faint light of a crescent moon.

“Is that another joke, Death?”

<I fear that I’m picking up the traits of a human,> Death said. <A fate far worse than death.>

“No pun intended?”

<None whatsoever.>

Harry’s smile faded. “I may be the only sane person in existence, and that terrifies me. Am I the only one willing to go so far to save creation? I’m just human, one of billions, and here I am shooting the breeze with you, Death himself. Doesn’t anyone else care?”

Is there anyone to care?

<As for my lot, Harry,> Death whispered. <Creation could have done a lot worse than humanity as its backbone. And I do not think an eternity of war lies ahead of you. One way or another, there will soon be no darkness left to slay. What need for a Darkslayer then?>

Harry cursed low under his breath, and rubbed the light stubble on his cheeks. “Do you know why I came here, Death, all the way from life?” Standing in the shadows, his scythe a sickly crimson hue under the moon, Death didn’t move but Harry felt his presence shrug in a that’s-obvious kind of way.

<You came because you are the Darkslayer. It is your purpose to lead the souls of your world against the Enemy. A design sewn into the fabric of creation at the dawn of time ensures this – this one chance for salvation.>

Harry shook his head and slapped his knees, wanting to laugh but unable to do so. “I came for the girl,” he said, and managed a bitter chuckle.

“That’s all – nothing more, and nothing less. I came to rob you, Death, of a soul you took from me. Ginevra Weasley, died August 11th 1997 – because this *creation*—” Harry spat the word. “Because this *nightmare* gave me very powerful enemies.>

<Humans wake up from nightmares, and you are not sleeping.>

“ENOUGH!” Harry roared, jumping to his feet. His patience had finally snapped into tempestuous lashings of righteous anger. “For the love of Christ, and all that is good, *enough of the mystical bullshit!*”

Easy, Harry, Ethan whispered. You get angry and things start falling apart.

The ground beneath his feet was shaking, and overhead a blanket of thick black storm clouds had gathered in a heartbeat and were crackling

with barely suppressed lightning and fury.

A mirror of Harry's emotions. Creation was sensitive to him now, more than ever.

"...only human...." he muttered. "Only... only... human."

<And do you have any idea just how magnificent that is?> Death asked.
<Humanity... is the dividing force between all that is good, and all that is evil.

You are the grey! The Twilight between the day and the night. *That* is why you are constantly at war – your race are the self-appointed guardians of the Balance, whether you know it or not.>

"We quit," Harry said, and unleashed hell.

He heard the roses scream as waves of liquid fire annihilated all that they were. Rivers of lightning jumped across the earth and around Harry, *through* Harry. Flakes of ash and the harsh acrid smell of burnt life fluttered on the breeze. Great fissures rippled across the field and geysers of superheated steam blistered the ground.

Harry had his eyes closed and he was fighting – fighting himself – to rein in his anger and tie it down hard, to obliterate the part of himself that was dark, that was terrifying. The part that would fight Evil with evil, would fight the Shadow with its own darkness. Fire with fire.

"No, Harry, we don't."

Soft hands alighted on his shoulders. As gentle as feathers and as weightless. Ghostly fingers ran down his black sleeves and onto the hardened skin of his arms. Harry spun, opened his eyes and all his anger was dispersed to the far corners of his mind, where it would fester so long as there was Voldemort to fight.

"Boy... when you want to be heard," Ginny whispered, smiling sadly.
"Hello, hero."

Harry looked around himself, and sighed. "I... I'm sorry about the mess."

A whirlwind of ashy flakes were falling from the heavens like snow. The field of roses had become a graveyard of twisted storks and shrivelled buds, half-glimpsed through holes in the clouds in which beams of slanted starlight stretched across the sky and lit up the world.

"You had to let the power out somewhere," Ginny sighed, ever patient and caring. "Humans weren't made to hold so much magic, you know."

Harry had averted his gaze from Ginny's but now he brought it back, shaking his head and reaching for her hand. "I can see right through you," he said, as if over drinks.

"Being dead means I don't have to carry around that heavy body anymore, Harry. I'm no longer mortal."

Harry once again found laughter beyond his reach. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you, Gin."

A ghostly hand moved through his shoulder, as if to nudge him. "Oh pish posh, Potter," Ginny said. "You did what I wanted you to do – survive. We both knew there were more important things than you and I going on. This isn't some sappy romance story."

"No... nothing so terrifying, thank God."

Ginny laughed. "I hear these days you're the closest thing Creation has to a God... or a caretaker at least." Her hand brushed the Rose Mark that ran down his left arm to the back of his palm.

"I'm just looking after the place for the time being," Harry replied. "You know how it is... same shit, different day."

Ginny stroked a loose lock of Harry's hair away from his forehead and uncovered the infamous lightning bolt scar. She sighed, but then

brightened.

"They're all waiting for you, you know. Just beyond the next sunrise, and on towards dusk, your parents – Sirius."

"I rather expected they were."

"Aren't you nervous... scared, even, Harry?"

Harry frowned. "I think... I think before I lost you I might have been, but all of my fears have been taken away now. I've faced and overcome everything Creation and the Enemy had to throw at me. It drove me insane, drove me to the edge many times, and billions suffered the consequences, but billions always will... no, Gin, not scared or nervous. Curious, I'm curious."

"There's trouble back home, you know."

Harry nodded. "I feel it... here," he said, and tapped his scar. "All of the worlds in all of the universes are crying out in pain, Gin – *all of them*, but none more so than our own. Earth... our Earth, knows she's about to die."

"But you'll save her." Not a question.

Harry shrugged and traced his fingers down the winding stork of the Mark on his left arm. He wasn't surprised in the least when he pricked his finger on one of the tattoo's thorns about his elbow.

A calm breeze was blowing over the land now, whisking away the smoke and dousing the flames of Harry's power.

<Death will save the living,> the Reaper said. <Commanded by the Darkslayer your army will defeat the threat of Annihilation.>

Harry sighed, felt for Ginny's hand and got nothing but mist, and then scrubbed away his own feelings and emotions, once again thinking of *all* others

before himself. He had to do what he had to do, and he had to do it fast.

“Gather the troops then, Death – no time for family reunions, not yet – I think we’re very short of time.”

“Three weeks have faded since my death,” Ginny informed Harry, and he scowled.

It had only been a few short hours for Harry. Time was relative... flexible, almost non-existent in its bending reality – which was thin.

“Then we may be too late,” Harry said, eternally calm. “So be it. I’ll raze whatever’s left to the ground and show the Enemy where the line is drawn. *No more.*”

“Sure you’re not scared, Mr. Twilight?” Ginny asked, smiling and winking.

“I don’t fear the Enemy,” Harry laughed. “No, no, no, no, no.... It *offends* me, Gin, and that is much worse. It should offend all of us. What right does this... this *evil* have to exist in our Creation – none!” Harry paused and absently wiped the blood from his rose-pricked finger on his shirt. “Why do only a few share outrage at this monster....?” he whispered.

We’re all outraged, Harry, all of us that are good, and all of us who serve Twilight, Ethan muttered. But only you and your friends have the strength to turn that outrage into power. You were chosen, by a design beyond your story. All or nothing now – do or die.

It’s been too long between battles... I want the demons to suffer again.

They will, but so will we....

A few short months ago, Ron mused, he had been worrying over very little, unimportant matters. He and Hermione both.

I was still in Hogwarts, dreading exams and wondering what had happened to Harry after the Hogsmeade Battle.

And now he felt old. Time had flown steadily onwards, days becoming weeks becoming months, but to each his own and it was all relative. Ron felt as if he had aged years since Hogwarts closed for the summer and Harry returned, only to bring with him tidings of the end of Time and Space, and enemies so powerful that entire continents were poised to be destroyed in merely the opening blows of the war.

All under You-Know-W.... *Voldemort*. Old habits die hard.

But Harry had also brought hope with him back from the abyss. Sure, he could set fire to the sky, battle demons and monsters beyond imagining that *shouldn't exist*, but did, and constantly rewrite the rules of magic and life, death and reality.

He was both Hero and Villain.

Ron knew that he had lost his old friend one hundred years ago in another reality. Harry knew it, had lived it, and in the place of that confused, sometimes scared, and always questioning himself boy... he now had a new Harry.

A Harry wrought in the fury of a million worlds. The Darkslayer.

When he had left he was sixteen, and sickened by the death he had recently caused in key battles of the Second Dark War. Now... just short months

later – a century – Harry was steel, the champion of a thousand battle campaigns and the natural leader of a torn, but powerful, human race.

He didn't kill without question... but it didn't faze him anymore, probably hadn't for decades... and he killed with such a cruel ease that it frightened

Ron, and he knew it terrified Hermione.

Ginny had... Ginny had *understood*.

And now they're both dead. They are both in death... but I think they'll be back.

Standing on the balcony that jutted out of the second floor of the command centre in Harry's compound – buried deep in the Australian desert – Ron sighed and ran his hand back through his hair. He felt old. The sun was hot overhead and the heat shimmered transparently on the dome of the shields that covered this facility for miles.

Dark rings ran around Ron's eyes but that was all right, he was adjusting to his rough schedule of five-minutes-sleep-whenever-there-was-a-spare-five-minutes, and knew he'd have to keep adjusting for some time yet. He stifled a yawn, glared at the sun on the horizon, and gazed down at the bustling camp splayed out beneath him.

As far as he could see in this direction the landscape was dotted with quickly constructed housing and city facilities, maintained and operated solely by magic. Lush green parkland separated the dusty streets, and, contrary to all the laws of nature, a vast lake bubbled quite happily at the centre of this park. Upon it, soldiers were training in speedboats – zooming back and forth in the modified muggle contraptions.

It was the last day of August.

Thousands of people milled about the growing city, which was still mostly deserted (and still growing), and the majority of them were getting ready for a battle not of this world, not of any world, that would decide the future of *every* world.

A pair of arms wrapped themselves around his chest and Hermione rested her head on his shoulder, looking just as tired as he felt. *Always beautiful,*
Ron thought, *always.*

"They ready back in there?" Ron asked, and while he was alone with Hermione he allowed his voice to sound tired.

"Not quite yet," she sighed, and leaned over his shoulder to kiss his cheek. "Forgot to shave this morning."

Ron laughed. "I've been jumping so many time zones that I haven't seen a morning in days. Gryffindor and I, Ric I mean, we've been chasing the twilight."

"Why?"

Ron shrugged and sighed. "I don't really know, but Ric seemed to think it important. 'The impossible is no longer so when twilight descends upon the world, Ronald. At times such as that, we have to be very, very careful.'"

"Find anything interesting?"

"Reality is tearing itself apart," he replied, with a calm that would have impressed Harry. "We saw it on the African coast last night... or maybe this morning... I can't work time zones... anyways, the sky was *bleeding*, Hermione."

"What!?" she exclaimed, grasping his hand and spinning him around to meet her eyes.

Ron laughed – bitterly. "Yeah, I know. It was... awful. You don't think it... but the world is alive, the universe is alive... and to watch it burn like that. It was, it was like when paint runs on a canvas, you know. A picture melting, our reality, this story, ending."

Hermione didn't have much to say. "You sound like Harry, you know."

Ron scowled and tapped his fingers restlessly against the balcony ledge. "How in the hell did it come to this?" he asked, not Hermione but merely

existence.

Hermione laughed and patted his shoulder soothingly. "It could be worse," she sighed, and they both laughed, both unable to see how it could possibly be any worse.

"We're going in an hour," Ron said after the following silence in their fading laughter. "That makes the most sense – tactically, you know."

"Ten thousand against... ten million," Hermione said, her voice void of emotion. "And this isn't really the final battle against Voldemort and his armies... what if the demons do break through, Ron, what then?"

Ron shrugged back and turned to lean against the ledge. He was smiling, and that was reassuring. "If it gets to that stage then I reckon Harry will probably make a heroic entrance and save the day – you know, milking the drama for all its worth like he usually does. Fire from his fingertips, rumbling earthquakes, wrenching mountains and furious winds – the full Harry Potter experience."

Hermione laughed, but that laughter – like so much else – died on the wind. "Hogwarts starts again tomorrow. Seventh year, all our old friends. I'm going to miss it."

Ron didn't say anything for some time, and then:

"I don't think we'll miss that much. For what it's worth, I reckon all this war business is going to be over, said, and done by Christmas."

Hermione shivered despite the heat. "That terrifies me," was all she said.

Ron nodded his agreement. "Keeps me up at night," he whispered, and then chuckled. "Although I haven't seen a night in a week or two, so I'm not sure about that."

"Can you imagine the world after this is all over?" Hermione asked. "Everything is going to be so different."

“Yeah, I know,” Ron said. “Humans will bounce back though, *when* we win. Harry knows that, I think, even though he’s not quite human anymore – probably because of it, actually. Humanity has enough imagination to bounce back from anything.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” Ron shrugged. “But it sounded deep.”

“It sounded *right*. Sounded like Harry again.”

“What do you think he is?” Ron asked then. “He’s... different, more than ever. And not just because of this Darkslayer nonsense. He does what he wants, whenever he wants.” Ron took a deep breath. “He knows the rules, but can choose to ignore them. It’s almost as if... as if....”

“He’s a God,” Hermione finished. “Or halfway there at least.”

“Do you think he knows that?”

“Without a doubt he does, and he’s fighting it tooth and nail... but he has to keep breaking the rules. If he didn’t, then all of this would have been over before we could blink, back in March and one hundred years ago to Harry.”

Ron nodded. “I feel so sorry for him... so much it hurts.”

Hermione knew the feeling. The pounding of her heart against her chest, the aching behind her eyes where tears threatened most of the time.

“It goes beyond not fair, doesn’t it,” Ron continued, speaking almost to himself. “For Harry, I mean, it’s never been fair – but this is just ridiculous... and we haven’t even gotten to the hard part yet.”

“No, the end of Harry’s story... well, I get the feeling that it’s going to be big, and probably not very happy.”

"I'll settle for a little happiness. He's earned it a million times over, after all."

And so it had begun.

The march towards the final chapter of this story, this war.

All across the worlds beyond mortal comprehension, beyond worlds of the flesh and into the realm that we are all doomed to tread one unknown day – the realm that fades darker than midnight on a starless eve, towards the rush of a cold and clear dawn, drenched in the sparkling remnants of a fiery twilight that, like humanity, stands between the warring factions of Light and Dark.

Through the endless paths and infinite ways that twisted and curved through the time and space between... not just universes... but entire clusters of alternate, parallel, and ultimately foreign realms, through that marched an army of souls – humans, of course, the souls of humanity's old warriors – and at their head walked a tired and almost utterly spent man.

Millions trod behind this man, walking in his wake and awed by his presence.

A man who was just a boy, who had always been just Harry.

The Darkslayer, the Heir to the Creator's Legacy.

The closest thing to a God existence had – and yet a human still bound by the laws of pain, and emotion... and, yes, even death.

Harry could still die.

A glittering sword was strapped to his back, and raw power jumped

between his fingertips and over his skin, rippling across his eyes and through his hair.

He was headed for home, yet again.

Earth – his Earth.

And Voldemort.

With all the fury of the Dead Legion he was coming, hand in hand with Ginny.

But am I too late....? Harry wondered. Who would dare stand against Voldemort without me there?

Harry thought he knew, and the thought was enough to terrify him.

His friends would fight in his absence, of course, as would Dumbledore and his scattering number of allies.

Voldemort would obliterate them beyond salvation with a wave of his hand. Of that, Harry was certain.

Tom Riddle still existed inside the Enemy that Voldemort had become, he still had his human thoughts and emotions. He... It... would not have surrendered his hate for Dumbledore, nor his prejudice against those of less than worthy blood.

And, Harry guessed, Voldemort would expect him there. And there was no word strong enough in any language to represent the level of hate that Voldemort held for him.

Some emotions cannot be described in language. They just were.

And I will be there, Harry thought, letting his fingers move slowly through the mist that was Ginny's hand. I will make it in time....

No, he wouldn't.

There was no way to escape that.

Fate, that old bitch, was blocking all the exits.

Millions of galleons and millions of dollars had been poured into the construction and outfitting of the Darkslayer Army base in the central desert of

Australia. As it stood, ten thousand soldiers were fitted with modified muggle weaponry – guns, grenades, and other such devices powered by the strength imbued in everyday crystal.

The army was supposed to be a hundred times bigger, a thousand times stronger, but time had run out. There had been only time to recruit and outfit people from the magical world, witches and wizards, and as such ten thousand lives were all that stood between humanity and the end of the world.

No report was sure, nothing was confirmed – there were no definitive answers, but Harry had spoken of the demons in their millions. Millions of rotting creatures trapped in a fold of reality, a prison of nothingness between universes, with a vast hate for life that transcended all bounds of rage.

Ten thousand against ten million, and anything else the Dark Lord Voldemort had to throw into the fray. And there the reports were more definite. At least fifteen thousand Inferi – corpses stolen from all across Europe and reanimated to serve the Shadow – as well as a Death Eater force, capable of using magic, of a few thousand.

Most of the magical folk in the world had chosen a side, and not all fought for the Light or the Dark. The majority of that community watched from the sidelines.

And then there was the select few Voldemort had changed, twisted his power into their very souls and made them his puppets. Puppets with power beyond a thousand normal witches and wizards. No doubt they would stand before the Army of the Darkslayer, whilst Voldemort worked his cruel purpose and unleashed the demons across the central grassy plains of North America.

All of this passed through Ron's mind as he prepared himself to follow the army to the plains and throw themselves against the might of the Dark Lord without their own champion, without Harry Potter.

Of all who knew him, none had thought he would abandon the cause, and yet word of his disappearance had spread through the army and even across international borders.

It had been leaked to the world that Harry Potter had not been seen in three weeks, and that his power base was crumbling. Thousands had come to serve Harry, and millions believed in him. Morale was at an all time low.

Damn you, Harry, Ron thought, strapping his third wand to a holster around his shin. He checked his first in the holster on his left arm, and then second on the right. He wore shielded leather armour, the armour Harry had bought the entire DA so many months ago. It would stop most curses, deflect most weapons, but not the Unforgivables.

A new addition was the muggle firearm he had. A fourth holster, this one for a modified pistol, hung from his belt, but he didn't trust the weapon that much. Not having much time to practice with it was one of the reasons why. Another was that he had been defending himself against dark wizards since meeting Harry with his wand, and had more faith in what he knew.

Ron wished Hermione was not coming, but he knew he couldn't stop her – had no right to stop her.

He couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to go terribly wrong, that they had all overlooked something vastly important, something the Dark Lord had done, or was planning to do, that would decimate them all.

Ron sighed. He hadn't seen his family in weeks, and now he was off to a battle that would decide the fate of – if not just one country, depending on the outcome, the entire planet. And he was going with the full knowledge of what they were up against, without Harry.

Where was he supposed to find the courage?

Gryffindor, of course.

With Harry gone, Gryffindor was all they had against Voldemort. Dumbledore had no illusions of matching Tom Riddle strength for strength, spell for spell, not after seeing Harry fight with the same power. But Gryffindor had... *different magic*.

He was also a Guardian, a transcended being of mammoth strength. At the very least, he would be a distraction for Voldemort.

So Ron holstered his wands, checked the crystal in his pistol, and tied his hair back out of his eyes. He was a Gryffindor, by God, and he would go down swinging.

For Harry.

For Ginny.

For Hermione.

For those he loved.

He would fight, he would *kill*, and he'd hope against all he knew that the next few hours would see the Dark Lord Voldemort defeated.

But, as Harry would have said, hope was a fleeting thing, a luxury that none of them could afford.

Harry wasn't a happy soul.

Hermione had been tasked with preparing the transfer of ten thousand men and women, heavily armed, with a few days worth of supplies, across several international boundaries and into a country illegally without alerting the authorities of the United States and her allies.

A task that would have been impossible, if not for Harry, who frowned at the impossible

The Department of Twilight technology had, using the plans and details Harry had brought back with him from the epicentre of Creation – although only a handful of people knew that – created a device that used coordinates around the globe, programmed down to within an inch anywhere on the planet, to open a portal.

Portal magic had always been a temperamental thing – neglected mostly by magical society, who relied on Apparation, portkeys and the like. Portals, on the other hand, could open a gateway to anywhere on the planet. A single step could take a person from the equator to the south pole, south pole to north.

A series of portal devices, like the three dozen Hermione had linked on the edge of the compound in the Australian desert, could even open a gateway two miles long and a hundred feet high. A gateway large enough to transport an army many times larger than the one she had in mind across continents in a heartbeat, avoiding all the nonsense that came with portkey travel and the wards that prevented mass-transit portkeys from crossing the borders of the U.S.

And with scouts, under the command of the Twilight Guardians, already searching the American plains for the armies of the Dark Lord, it was –

unfortunately – only a matter of time before she could key in the exact location, latitude and longitude, of the battle.

And then, slaughter – the largest magical battle the world had ever seen, but maybe not the last.

To Hermione, it didn't feel like the end.

This was only a warm up round before the gloves came off and Harry and Voldemort broke all bonds of reality and, after long last, fought to the death.

But there was a wild card in that deck – several, in fact. One was the laughing, smiling face of Allarius, which Hermione knew and feared. The Destroyers, billions of monstrous enemies, were still unaccounted for, but if Harry was to be believed were poised on attacking the world.

That was a concern that couldn't be ignored, but had to be for now.

We're lost without Harry, Hermione thought, checking the connections on her portal beams. She wiped away a tear angrily, and sniffed back further such drops of her fear. *How could it all come down to one man? What force did Harry trigger with his unwavering defiance that has brought it this far?*

The Darkslayer.

Hermione feared the answer to her questions, feared it more than death and life. But she felt, deep down in her heart, that Harry had been given a glimpse of those answers, and it had angered him.

Imagine a city – any city, but a big one would probably best. Five million or more inhabitants just to be on the safe side.

This city has towering skyscrapers, grid-like roads, parks and lakes,

pedestrians and countless slow-moving automobiles. It is a modern city, very shiny and full of shiny things. Within this city, let's call it Exist, within the city of Exist there are a myriad of different and ever changing stories that, like the city, are always growing.

So, above the surface we have buildings, people and the lives they lead, as well as the things in the background that we all notice but never take *any* notice of. Like the homeless folk, or the graffiti.

Exist *exists* in every sense of the modern word.

And beneath the city?

A network of pipes – sewerage pipes, drainage pipes, electrical conduits and what have you. The city works because of its foundations and the lack of such a network would, undoubtedly, destroy the fair metropolis of Exist.

The millions of people, millions of lives, and the construct of the city itself – the buildings, parks, lakes and what have you – *could not* survive without the underground, behind the scenes, workings of the network.

It simply wouldn't be, or... at the very least, wouldn't be as we see it.

No doubt it would be something less impressive than the metal jungle it is now.

Exist *exists*, and is, when you get right down to it, a model of the majesty of Creation.

Existence can be likened to a small human city, with its network of sustaining pipes and power supplies. But instead of buildings we have universes, and instead of cars and park, lakes and all the other features of a city, we have worlds – alive and dead – and stars.

Countless universes all lined up on top of one another, like a deck of

cards.

In between each one runs Existence's pipes, supplying life and energy – power and *drainage*- to a Creation that was, in the beginning, designed to run as smoothly as a city. Well... as smoothly as could be expected. A lot of stuff goes on behind the scenes we never see.

But, like with any city, time and use corrodes, corrupts, the sewerage, power, and water lines. They keep working, however, because they are renewed and replaced by trained guardians – workmen – the lines are made to last.

But what would happen to Exist if the workmen, the guardians, stopped their work. Were *stopped* from doing it.

A whole shit storm of trouble is the most probably (inevitable) outcome.

And if Existence lost its guardians, its heroes, then what would become of the universes and the plethora of other levels of creation. Realities that transcend normal time and space, beyond a contemporary universe. What would happen?

The sewers back up... the power flickers on and off and, after a short time, dies completely... contaminated water sources... piles of refuse and worse... disease spreads, chaos ensues....

Chaos claims the city in a very, very short time. Entropy – that destroyer of order, the unavoidable decay of society – unravels even time itself.

On the scale of Creation, a very short time could be a billion millenniums, or it could be a heartbeat.

Time doesn't matter, but... in the end... it is *all* that exists.

Thoughts such as these swam through Harry's head as he walked through the very same network of pipes and ways that kept Creation on its feet.

Behind him, still following silently, were the souls of the dead, compelled to fight for the Darkslayer by a design beyond their reckoning.

When they had first entered these paths, walking back from the edge of True Death, Harry had gagged on the rotten and fetid smell that assaulted his senses, made his eyes water and even throbbed in his ears. It was the hanging odour of disease, rotting matter, and of fever.

Existence was crumbling, it was melting, it was rotting and dying and splitting at the seams, across the edges of the worlds and along the borders of the universes. Creation was in pain, with corruption swarming through its veins.

And as the Rightful Heir, for the time being at least, Harry was particularly sensitive to that pain.

Sensitive is putting it lightly, he thought, scratching at his neck. The air, if it could be called air, irritated his skin. He was getting sick, very sick, and if he didn't do something soon then he would be in no shape to face the Dark Lord.

Voldemort.

That crazy old son of a bitch.

I'm rambling, Harry thought, glancing at Ginny on his right, shining faintly blue in the pressing darkness. *Sanity's slipping away again....*

"You don't look too well, kid," Ginny said, a whisper.

"I'm just having an off day," Harry shrugged, lying with all his skill. "I'm only human, after all, Gin. And I haven't slept in a very long time."

Ginny nodded. She looked as though she was going to press the matter further, but instead said nothing more about that. "How far do we have left to go?"

“Death didn’t say,” Harry replied, “and I don’t know where he’s gone so I can’t ask, but it feels as though we’re approaching something now... you feel it?”

“No....”

Harry nodded. He didn’t believe Ginny could feel it. It was like sensing a light in the darkness, although there was no light. His Mark – the tattoo of the Rose – was slowly getting warmer, and Harry intuitively knew he was approaching a place where he could punch back into his own world.

The only world that mattered.

The last bastion of Good, of Light, and of Hope.

Had he tried now, to bring not just himself but a million souls with him, he would likely get lost trying to open the way. His power was not infinite, and it was never reliable. Anything could happen should he attempt to open a way between reality and time, universes and space, this close to the realm of the Dead.

God, he felt terrible.

Human life was never meant to walk beyond mortality and all the worlds it could hold.

He felt feverish – sweating and finding himself short of breath.

Of this sickness he could do nothing. He wasn’t a healer, his magic had never really been able to heal. Sure, a few cuts and bruises here and there – a broken bone or two – but his power was too wild, he used it too crudely, to fight off disease or worse. Even his metal leg was just brute power forcing an element into a form he desired.

No, he was sick and getting sicker.

And it was a wasting sickness.

Harry glanced down at the back of his right hand and saw a red sore festering where, an hour ago, the skin had been blemish free and whole. Soon that sore would rupture, and it was beyond his skill to heal the sickness.

Harry cursed under his breath.

Was this the heroic end to the Darkslayer?

After everything, was his body simply going to eat itself away...?

DEFIANCE!

Harry would be damned if it would. He knew of a cure, of course, had known of it for decades, but it would be near impossible to reach. In fact, Harry thought it would be truly impossible.

The only impossible thing he had ever faced, and not found himself a match to it.

He knew what caused his sickness. His connection to Creation, a *necessary* link, was responsible. Without it he would not have his army, Existence would fail much faster, and any chance of defeating Voldemort was gone, but this sickness tightened the odds considerably.

And the cure... Nothing less than the total eradication of the Enemy from Creation. Every last trace of the Destroyer, of Evil, would have to be wiped away beyond oblivion for his body to have any chance to heal itself.

Somehow, Harry did not think he would have an afterlife if he failed to destroy his enemies. He would simply cease to exist, and while that appealed to his darker side, his tired side, he did not truly want to die.

Not when he had love.

And love, above and beyond all other power, was a rare challenge against the impossible.

“We’re close to a... nexus point in Existence, Gin,” Harry said. “A place where a million, million universes intersect, and if I’m right then our world is inside one of them. I can open a door there.”

“And then what?”

A million souls echoed the same question.

Harry did not honestly know. He had suspicions, rough ideas, but he wasn’t sure.

Defiance had led him to Soul, or maybe Soul had led him to Defiance. Those two, at least, could go either way. But presiding over it all was Sword – the Beginning and the End – it was the governing force of all Creation. The Sword, the weapon – war and peace – where the mighty fought and died.

He carried a sword on his back.

But what made humanity different was not their mortality, but rather their Imagination.

Imagination led to Sword – the governing force of **all** – and beyond that lay Defiance and Soul, Soul and Defiance.

And these forces were the code of the Guardians, of the Protectors of Twilight.

Perhaps these forces were... Harry thought they were... the foundation for Creation. The Creator had to start somewhere, why not there? It made sense. To Harry it made sense.

IDSS, he thought, *ISDS*...

He felt sick.

And then a twist in his gut made him retch, stumble and nearly fall. But that wrench had nothing to do with his wasting sickness. He knew that pull well, had felt it for a one hundred years.

It was his Darkslayer sense... the pull that alerted him to the forces of the Enemy.

“DESTROYERS!” he yelled, and his cry rang back through the army that marched behind him, whispered by a thousand ghostly voices. “PREPARE FOR BATTLE!”

Harry’s arms were, in the blink of an eye, fused with liquid white and silver power. And argent blaze of pure strength that even dulled the edge of his sickness. Harry allowed himself a moment to bask in the impossible surge of strength that rushed through his veins. An ocean of power that he had only ever barely tapped, and yet it was enough to destroy Time and Space.

That was the paradox of Good and Evil.

The Balance.

His cry went out not a moment too soon, as from above – from all around, rising out of the dark ground and from all sides – black masses of destruction and chaos took form.

An ambush, Harry’s mind screamed. *They’re guarding the ways back to my world, and Voldemort.*

Harry amplified his voice with magic and levitated himself into the air. He carried with him an ethereal glow, and was visible for tens of miles in all directions. For where they were there was no horizon, no curvature of the world. The network of Creation was infinite in all directions.

“HEAR ME!” he roared, as the Destroyers took form into horrendous nightmares. “YOUR FIRST FIGHT IS HERE, AND YOU WILL NOT FALTER! YOU ARE HUMAN, YOU ARE DEFIANT! SHOW THIS FOUL RABBLE WHAT IT MEANS TO WAKE THE RAGE OF MORTALITY, OF THE SOUL!”

And not waiting to see if he was obeyed, Harry became power incarnate.

A sea of raw power burst from him with the strength of a supernova. Of the end. No one should have been able to control such power, but Harry had learnt his craft well. He directed the flow of energy, which poured from him effortlessly, away from his army and forward.

Tens of thousands of Destroyers, those guarding the way ahead, simply disintegrated into less than nothing. The rest fell on the army of human souls, several hundred thousands of twisted shapes and dark shadows, and cries of rending flesh, of battered origins, echoed across the expanse of this level of existence.

Harry’s army was not invincible, especially to the Destroyers. Being dead had its disadvantages. The Destroyers were not creatures of life and flesh, they could be if they so choose, but their true form was one that didn’t exist on *any* real level of Creation.

They were the Enemy that had struck down the Creator, and they would not be denied.

It was a heavy price to pay, but sharp claws, jagged teeth and untamed strength flowed from the Destroyers – from legion after legion – and it destroyed the radiance of the soul. Like a candle exposed to the wind, the light in many souls was extinguished in the heat of the battle. To where the lost souls went is unknown, but it wasn’t back to the afterlife.

They were already dead, after all. What lay beyond death?

Harry directed his rage towards the flying monstrosities that were

attacking his army from overhead. Beams of power cut smooth ribbons through the mass of enemy in the air, lighting up the area as clear as day, before fading as Harry spun faster and faster, directing his power to where it was needed most.

Something struck his forehead and blood splattered down into his eyes. He didn't notice it – the first cut of many to come.

But even in the surge of the battle he could not help thinking about this delay, and what it might mean to the world he knew and fought for.

Ron and Hermione were alone with Voldemort. His opposite, equal.

Every second he delayed meant minutes lost back home. Days were weeks.

Time was running out, and something told him the Destroyers would not just let him return to his own world without a fight. And this force, four hundred thousand maybe, was not even a millionth of their true number. How many more fights before he could cut his way back into the mortal universes?

One was too many.

He would be too late.

Rage and white fire consumed Harry Potter, and beneath that disease wasted him away.

Thanks for reading and hopefully reviewing. Sorry about the update wait but I work an awful lot. I love you all, never forget that.

Chapter 29 next-will be up when it is up. Won't be as long of a wait as this one was.

Chapter 29 – The End

Part I – Defiant Soul

*...we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; **we shall never surrender.***

~~Winston Churchill (1940)

When the shit hits the fan, be it magical or not, nine times out of ten it hits it fast and it hits it hard.

No hero is immortal until they die, Harry.

A battle is days and hours of anxious, terrified waiting and then five minutes of heated bloodshed and maniacal gore. Hacking and shooting, running

and raging, ending and giving up. And for those who persevere, victory or death – one and the same most times, or so close as to be indistinguishable.

The great tragedy of your life, Potter, is not what you've lost, but what you've come so close to winning.

War has value, despite what the critics say. Life for life, courage in death, and all the cliché morals that give a soldier's struggle meaning, they *do matter*. If the cause is just...

A thousand million, thousand billion lives, Harry. The cost! Ah, the cost. War, like love and like life, always finds a way. There'll be the devil to pay soon, all too soon.

For what it's worth after so long, here is how the cards were dealt in the last days of Creation....

September

1st

Things aren't the way they were before, Ron Weasley thought, standing amongst the great and the wise at the forefront of the largest magical army on the face of many planets.

On his left was Dumbledore, on his right Godric Gryffindor, and nearby stood Hermione and most of the Order of the Phoenix. Fred and George were here, as was Bill, but the rest of his family were back in England, running the Ministry and keeping hope alive as best they could.

A shimmering desert landscape held row upon row of heavily armed soldiers, dressed in twilight robes over magically reinforced body armour. Each soldier carried an array of gadgets and weaponry, ranging from hand grenades to their wand. It was a virgin force, really, having never been tested in a battle – but it would get its chance soon.

Ron fully expected to win the coming confrontation. He could expect no less, not when the other outcome was total and complete annihilation of the entire world. A world ruled over by a tyrannical madman that only one person had a chance of killing.

And Harry better kill him, Ron thought. *He needs killing – long since needed killing. Damn you Voldemort, damn you to hell.*

“But then Hell's too good for him...” Ron muttered.

Across a large empty swath of the desert long silver pylons rose towards the sky, arrayed periodically for about a mile and, every few seconds or so, a sharp bolt of electric blue lightning danced from the top of one pole to the next. They were transport pylons, connected to the ground and keyed with the latitude and longitude of every point upon the earth. Flick a switch and they opened a gateway a mile long and high to anywhere.

Technology could be a splendid thing.

Hermione held the keypad that controlled the transport pylons, and Ron knew that it did not shake in her hand. He thought, no, he knew it would shake in his own hand. His stomach was doing flips and the battle hadn't even begun yet. A lot of people were going to die today for a world that would never really know the truth, or give proper thanks for the sacrifice.

Where are you, Harry?

There was a palpable tension in the air, of an entire world holding its breath and waiting for salvation, even though damnation was the far more likely outcome.

"Slytherin has a lot to answer for,' Godric 'Ric' Gryffindor said quietly, only Ron heard him. "Who thought it could come to this?"

Ron blinked. "I think Harry saw it coming. He had a better idea than any of us, at least."

Gryffindor paused, his eyes scanning the legion of loyal soldiers before turning to Ron. "He has power enough to destroy Creation in a heartbeat, enough to do what the Destroyers have been trying to do since the beginning of time. You know, Ron, that he has to die for the salvation of Creation, the destruction of Voldemort and the end of the Oath and Prophecy."

Ron sighed, rubbed at his eyes and then found a glare. He still felt anger through his misery and pain. White-hot anger. "No, he doesn't. I won't allow

it, Ric. Not after everything else."

"You have known him for six, seven years, Ron. I have watched him battle all odds for a century, and the only thing that has ever come close to killing him has been the heir of Slytherin, Voldemort. It has to be that way, in the end. There are bounds of Prophecy and true magic running between those two. Creation, perhaps the Creator Himself, saw that and He was always one for self-sacrifice."

Ron snorted. "It ain't over till it's over, mate. And Harry might not agree with God."

“It is not about agreement. Harry understands his role, that is why he fights. He knows he has to die, Ron.”

“Harry fights for us, for humanity. He doesn’t give a damn about anything else!”

Gryffindor sighed, and thought: *You are wrong. He fights for all of Creation, and he uses you for that. He’s damned, Ronald, and knows it.* But all he said was: “Peace, my friend.”

Hermione’s footsteps were sure on the hard-packed orange sand of the Australian desert. She held the portal activation remote calmly in her hand, her lips compressed into a thin line, and her face all business.

“Two minutes,’ she whispered. Her thumb rested on the activation switch, aptly coloured bright red. She raised her hand and sent a signal down the line, doing her best to ignore the fact that right now she should be on the Hogwarts Express, in a carriage with her friends and trying not to show how much she was fretting over the work load of the new, and final year, at the school of magic.

Who am I to help lead this army? she thought, allowing her fears to rise for just a moment. *Harry should be here, he’s the one with all the experience for goodness sake!*

But Harry’s not here, a more practical voice spoke up. *He’s died for love.*

Hermione sniffed and, with final nods to Dumbledore, Ron, Gryffindor and the squad leaders, Hermione raised the portal device and pushed the ‘on’ button. A deep thrumming filled the air, vibrated up the length of the pylons and a fountain of blue sparks erupted from the tips of the new devices.

All of which made possible by the knowledge Harry had *borrowed* from the Ways of Twilight, from the files stored on the back-up disks to Creation itself.

Much like a pair of curtains being parted, the dusty azure of the horizon between the pylon poles first spread apart, and then revealed a much more

thriving landscape of lush green plains, miles upon endless miles of swaying grass and cloudy blue skies that made up the central plains of North America.

Marring the almost idyllic picture of fertile land was a bulge in the very sky, lower than the clouds and casting a crippling shadow a mile wide over the land. A black elongated sphere of the darkest magic festering on the canvas of reality, attempting to break the barrier between this mortal world and the prison of the between-universes that kept the demons, the waste of existence, away from life and light.

“Well howdy,” Ron managed, his throat suddenly very dry. “I don’t like the look of that thing.”

“He’s doing it,” Gryffindor whispered. “Good God, it’s happening again. *Again!* What is the point?”

“I believe we are witnessing the connection of two universes, are we not?” Dumbledore asked.

Gryffindor shook his head. “That... that bulge is not a bridge between universes, but a doorway into the void, into the prison of the damned and the decayed. Dumbledore, that is the *end of your world.*”

“How interesting,” Dumbledore mused. “I wonder where Tom has got to.”

A breeze as cold as the air here in the desert was hot blew in through the portal, spiralling out from the growing maelstrom in the sky. Wisps of dark cloud, sickeningly thick, stretched down to brush the swaying grass of the plains beneath the bulge, plunging that part of the world into an unnatural darkness and killing the foliage.

“I bet a shiny galleon You Know Who is in that mess.” Ron chuckled mirthlessly. “And Merlin knows what else...”

Dumbledore held his wand tightly in one ancient hand. There was a knot of worry struggling to remain hidden on the old man’s face. He was worried, about Hogwarts. Today the new school year began... and he was here. “Well then, shall we advance, Ronald?”

“You’re asking me!” Ron felt his heart leap into his throat. He looked

around, caught Hermione's reassuring gaze, her unwavering loyalty, and collected his nerve. "Sure, why not?"

Power brimmed along the razor sharp edge of the large portal, fierce bolts of harnessed pure energy. It was a sight to behold, a whole new age of magic had been used to create it – magic mixed with technology. And it wouldn't be around for long, if the Monster had its way.

Ron prepared himself to signal the advance, even got so far as raising his hand to the field commanders arrayed at the forefront of the army, when the air between him and the transport portals began to sizzle and moan. *What now?* There was a crack and a slit, as sharp as a razor, cut down through the air and white light poured in through the wound.

"What—?" Dumbledore began, but then his breath caught as a horribly disfigured and hunched figure emerged from the gap before the portals, collapsing onto the red desert earth in the dusty sand.

The figure, kneeling on all fours, gagged once, twice, and then vomited a stream of blood and spit, mixed with a sickening yellow puss onto the ground.

"Merlin," Ron breathed, making a move toward the figure. There was something familiar about the unruly mess of black hair that hung matted and clumped on his head.

"...*stay back...*" Harry Potter commanded. His voice was weak, dry and desperate, but still defiance coursed through it in unmatched waves.

He threw up again, mostly blood this time.

Tattered rags were all that hung to Harry's frame. He was drenched in blood, some fresh most dried to his skin. His metal leg was dull and tarnished, reflecting harshly the hot desert sun.

No one moved toward Harry, no one quite dared....

Wearily, he crawled to his feet, swaying on the spot and steadying himself by closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Ron saw that there was something on his arm, underneath the blood and grime. A picture, a tattoo, of a rose. A white rose. A mark. *What the hell had happened to*

him?

"Harry..." Hermione said, and Ron could hear the heartache in her voice.

Harry looked up toward the sound of her voice with eyes that were not just bloodshot, but *bloodsoaked*. The whites of his eyes were completely red, burst capillaries.

And damn it all, despite how he looked, Harry Potter smiled. "Hi, guys," he managed. "Was hoping I'd catch you before it was too late...."

No one spoke, and Harry's eyes past over them all, returning at the end to meet Gryffindor's.

"Guardian," Harry said blankly.

"Darkslayer," Gryffindor replied. "You have... changed."

Harry tilted his head to the left. "I have been changed."

"You need a healer, Harry," Dumbledore said, raising his wand. "Here...."

Harry snapped his fingers and instantly he was clothed in hard leather pants and a vest, thick boots and across his back the sword he had carried for a century hung in its sheathe. A black bandana kept the hair out of his eyes, covered his infamous scar. All of the blood disappeared as if it had never been.

The change was phenomenal. Instead of looking like a walking corpse, Harry now looked only close to death....

"What happened?" Ron heard himself whisper.

Harry chuckled. Insane.

"You lot were probably expecting an entrance a lot more dramatic, right? Sorry to disappoint. Tell you the truth I didn't think we'd make it...."

"We?" Ric asked.

"I brought back... everyone," Harry whispered. He gazed out over the ranks of living soldiers before him. "But can't bring them through just

yet... it may not be necessary now.”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked. “Merlin, Harry... you’ve never looked worse.”

Harry chuckled. “Tell me I’m still pretty, Ron.”

“As the day I met you.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore interrupted. “We have to move fast. Behind you, through the portals, Tom intends to break into the prison of demons.”

“Oh I know, we’ll get to that.” Harry raised his arms above his head, clearly displaying the long and winding tattoo. The white rose petals shimmered softly in the light. It was calming just to gaze at that mark. “But there are things that need doing first. Number one, this army isn’t going through to

North America. Send them to Hogwarts—”

“Harry,” Hermione began.

“Don’t argue, just see that it’s done. They’ll be slaughtered on those plains. Have them defend Hogwarts. We’re at the end game now, people.

Happened sooner than I’d planned, and it’s gonna leave a helluva mess, but it can’t be helped. Defy or die, folks. Ha ha ha...”

Insane, Ron thought again. *Lost his bloody marbles*.

“Professor,” Harry continued, “you should be at your school. Voldemort and I may not be entirely human anymore, but we do retain the core of ourselves no matter what powers change us, twist us, or *rape* us. He will make a move on Hogwarts today, September 1st.”

Having just come through a tear in reality looking deader than dead, it was somewhat amazing to watch Harry take control of both himself, and the entire defence of his home world. There was no give in his defiant eyes, there never had been. It had been a long time since he had been unsure about anything, uncertain what to really do.

Ha ha ha... all the death and destruction that followed would be placed solely on his shoulders. He had long since ceased to care about that. Couldn't be helped. He'd still rather it didn't happen, but yeah, couldn't be helped. In some ways he was as much a monster as Lord Voldemort.

"What about the Demons and the Dark Lord himself, Darkslayer?" Gryffindor asked.

At this Harry grew deathly silent. A look of... something... swam across his face. He calmly traced the tattoo on his arm with his fingers, avoiding the thorns that could draw blood. That look though... it was fear.

Harry said one word. And it was enough. "Oblivion."

"What do you know?" Gryffindor persisted.

Harry took calm steps towards the Guardian. The air hummed and vibrated around him. No longer could he conceal or mask the aura of his power.

That *ever-growing strength* which had made his story more than it should ever have been. It was power enough to tear the very pages of his tale apart. Every moment, every word, was one more nearer to the end.

And at any moment, Creation could end. If it did, *all stories* would stop mid-sentence. And what did that matter really, if it happened? Gods, no one would be around to care.

But it ain't over till it's over. And Harry was, in a way, the writer now of his story, of this final war.

"What do you know?" Gryffindor had asked.

Harry was close enough so that only Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore and Gryffindor could hear him. "I know... *everything*," he whispered. "No longer human. I'm the closest thing to a god you're going to find. But I'm *not* a god. The real God, our Creator, is dead." *But even death is never the end...* "Because of this," he continued, tracing the rose on his arm, "I know all that He knew, I know His Design."

Gryffindor was pale, shaking. "Did he account for the destruction of the Enemy, of the creature that is now Lord Voldemort?"

"Oblivion," Harry said again, and then again... "Oblivion, Oblivion, Oblivion." He closed his eyes, his mind travelling to every sickened corner of all

Creation. In an instant he experienced the senses of everyone and everything. He was a rose on a garden world of plants, a moon orbiting a ringed barren planet, a speck of dust and a ray of light, a human, an alien... he was burning fire in a forest of purple trees on a world with twin suns, he was ice underneath a dark ocean.

A comet hurtling through the cosmos in some distant universe....

A whale breaching the surface of a world without land....

The hand of a clock ticking away precious moments of existence....

He was icing on a cake....

He was a lover....

A soldier....

He was a ghost....

Harry was everyone, knew everything....

And in all of Creation, in all the worlds in all the universes, there was only one thing he wasn't, one thing he could not touch. And that thing was only a handful of miles away.

Voldemort, the Nemesis of all Existence.

"Oblivion... what does that mean?"

"It means nothing," Harry sighed. He was a star being born, a fish being caught... "Oblivion is a place of nothing. In Oblivion, only darkness... I think I may have created it, wrote it into this tale so that it can finally end. Oblivion is not in any universe, or on any other level of Creation. It is... nowhere, *everywhere*. The nothing from which everything came, and to which it must naturally return... one day."

“Is this the end, Harry?” Hermione asked, feeling nothing but sorrow for her old friend. He was dead, and knew it. And yet had to go on living. Where was the happy fairytale ending?

“In the World That Doesn’t Exist, the Universe That Denies Creation... there is an end. That end is Oblivion, Hermione.” Harry laughed, and the terrible fear on his face was replaced by one of blissful joy. “*I’ve found an ending,*” he trembled. “This is the *deus ex machina*.”

“Will there be a world left afterwards?”

Harry opened his eyes. “We’ve won if we risk everything a final time, guys.” That dreamy look, that distant fearful and joyful stare on his face, had disappeared. Harry seemed more awake, more in touch with the world now.

Harry, Ethan Rafe whispered. That old and yet sometimes unfamiliar wraith in his mind. A fragment of a soul long since dead. Dead yes, but in the fallibility of time existed once again upon another world.

Yes?

You don’t have a plan.

Just sorta winging it now, old buddy.

Harry cleared his throat. The gem-encrusted hilt of his sword, hanging in the sheathe on his back, glittered in the desert sun. He looked around at his friends and allies casually, trying to find a smile. “Okay then, folks. Here’s how it lays out... Ron, Dumbledore, Hermione, you take everyone back to

Hogwarts, defend it. Voldemort himself may not attack, but there are thousands of his followers that will. He may send some of the supercharged inner circle...” Harry paused. “But don’t worry. I’ll be along shortly.”

“Where are you going, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry jerked his thumb over his shoulder, pointing to the thunderous unnatural storm cloud growing on the North American plains visible

through the portal. “Deal with that, and take a shot at the title for Most Powerful Being In Creation.” Harry grinned. “I’m going to go see Tom Riddle.”

“You’re really going to end it today, Harry?” Hermione asked. “What... what if you die?”

Quite simply, Harry said, “Then all that was, is, and will be dies with me, and the Dark Lord, the Enemy, and the Legion of the Destroyer, will get what they want – a nothingness of darkness for... well, *eternity*.” Harry thought about that long and hard for a moment. “And what may be truly terrifying is not that you will die, but that you may live to see that. Non-existence, Annihilation and Oblivion would be more merciful than living in Creation’s End.”

Ron sighed. “And on *that* cheery note....”

Time to get this show on the road, Ethan said.

Harry let his eyes travel over the people he cared most about in this, or any world. He recalled his century-long journey across the thousands of mortal worlds, the millions he had met and lost, the wars and fights fought for one simple thing – to get home. He had risked everything, won and lost more times than he could remember, and yet...

It had all been so he could return to here, to this world, and try and reclaim the life he lost when Voldemort tore open reality, completely unaware that he was setting in motion the end of all things. Had the Design been a part of Harry even then, as he stepped into the void of the Stream and Boundary to stop Hogwarts from falling? Was that the Darkslayer’s beginning?

No matter.

The world he had fought so hard to return to, this world, and all the others that had been destroyed by his actions and the demon-Enemy Allarius, had been restored once, and Harry had thought then that his time affecting the foundations of reality, his adventures with demons and Destroyers and all the countless beings in all the countless levels of creation, had been over.

He had thought he could reclaim a normal life, but no such thing existed.

What had that old smilin' bastard Allarius said, way way back when defiance began to change into his soul... *For you, Harry Potter, it will never be over.*

It will never be over...

How *true* that had been.

And now here he was, on the brink of total annihilation again. There was a small ray of hope, but that lay also in Oblivion. There was hope for the continued existence of life and light, but no hope for him, for the Darkslayer, the Heir of Creation and the Boy Who Lived.

The great tragedy of your life, Potter, is not what you've lost, but what you've come so close to winning.

God, who had said that?

And what next, Harry wondered. If there was a God he'd ask Him, but there wasn't. Just an empty Throne lying barren at the Ways of Twilight... a creation without rule, without a power to enforce law. To that, there could be only one inevitable outcome:

Chaos.

And say he did win this war, this so-called Final War, then what?

What could be left for Harry James Potter, the most infamous and deadly being ever to live, if all his enemies were finally destroyed? What would be his purpose then? Life and love, perhaps, and on some distant day a final death, and then an afterlife...

Would my consciousness exist forever, knowing all that I know, remembering all that I have done?

It seemed a terrifying prospect, to have to live with the memories of everything. All the blood, sweat and tears of all the wars.

So what to do what to do? *Got any suggestions, Ethan?*

Ginny.

She's dead.

That can't stop you.

You think I should, if I win, lay down the sword and what, return to Hogwarts for my final year? Pass the NEWT exams and get a job, maybe play Quidditch professionally, become an Auror and stop nasty bad dark wizards? And oh yeah, marry the girl I killed and live happily ever after?

Isn't that what you walked a hundred years for? That, or something like it. You know there are no true happy endings, Harry, but there can be happiness.

"Harry..." Hermione tried to pull him from his thoughts, but he wasn't done yet.

I came back from the Ways of Twilight and thought I would only have one war to fight, one enemy to defeat – the first, Lord Voldemort. But the Enemy never forgot me, and now look... this is my defiance all over again, Ethan, and last time I had to erase a hundred years of history to get back here, and try again...

What are you saying?

That everything that has happened since I returned... you know, the vampires, the storm demon, the army I built, nation I conquered, cities destroyed, the battles fought, they were just an attempt to stop what has happened from happening. I knew the truth all along, but I tried to, ha, I tried to defy it!

Ethan smiled sadly, feeling both Harry's fatigue and the long dusty ache of a billion footsteps taken towards this end. You're the Darkslayer, he said.

Yes, I am, and that means the Enemy, the true Enemy, that is now Voldemort, has always been my concern. The Design in creation, the

Creator's last attempt to save all He created, has been turning me and twisting me towards this end since I first left this world. I've been fighting it every step of the way, haven't I?

Defying everything...

The Darkslayer's task is to slay Darkness – the Design chose me because of my sword, my defiance, and I believe my soul. It chose a mortal human to grant untold strength and power... I don't use magic, do I? No, Ron and the others use magic, I use Power.

Voldemort does too, Harry.

I know, Harry sighed with the strength of creation at his fingertips. I did that, I'll fix it... today.

This the end, partner?

I hope so. Hope is all I can afford now.

Ethan was silent for a long moment. You can't afford hope and defiance. You should have done this the moment you returned, instead of trying to turn this creation, our reality, back into something not so... so epic.

I was afraid I'd lose... no excuse, though.

And in Harry's mind, two men stood amongst a field of white roses as the sun set on a perfect world where all was at peace. This time of day was known as twilight. Harry and Ethan clasped hands and laughed. One the most powerful being in existence, the other two halves of two different souls both belonging to the son of Tom Riddle.

Two men, two boys.

Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived, and Ethan Rafe, just another soul who got caught up in this adventure.

Speaking in his mind, Harry said... "Once more unto the breach, dear friend?"

Ethan smiled. They were both tired, mind body and soul, but this time they were going to make sure it was over. "Let's go kick his ass out of our creation."

Well said.

Harry stepped out of his thoughts and back into the desert. He blinked

and nodded. "All set then, guys," he told the others. "Hermione, open this portal on the Hogwarts grounds and hold that castle fast. I'll be along later, perhaps. Do your best, and don't be afraid to die... it won't be forever if I win."

"If, Harry?" Godric Gryffindor said. "Well I wish you luck, Darkslayer."

"Oh don't wish me luck." Harry's palms blazed with white power. "Wish me *whirlwinds of tempestuous fire*, wish me a firm resolve, and a defiant soul. Wish me imagination, Gryffindor, wish me an ending."

An end to all things... but would the fires at the end of the world consume or redeem the life of creation?

To that, there was no answer.

Nobody knew.

Not even Harry, and his Design.

As it had been before, *had always been*, all bets were off.

"To Hogwarts with you now," Harry said quietly. "And don't cry for me, guys, I've never felt better."

TODAY IT ENDS!

"Stay safe, Harry," Hermione said, and leapt forward, throwing her arms around his neck and embracing him hard. "Try not to do anything too foolish."

Harry seemed at first surprised by her hug, and it took a moment for him to bring his arms up around her back. He shook his head and remembered affection.

"Remember you're loved, okay," Hermione whispered. "You and him may have unlimited strength, but love is a power he can't have... it can defeat anything."

"That sounds so cliché, Hermione. This was never a love story."

"That's all it was..."

Hermione shuddered. Hugging Harry was like hugging a wall of ice. He was rigid, hard and unbroken. She also felt lost to him, to the destiny behind and ahead of him... to time, to adventure, to the scent of a thousand, thousand worlds. It was indescribable, unbelievable – the life and times he had seen. It had changed him, changed his very being.

Hermione didn't know how she felt.

She could smell his scent, like an old dusty trail... but more than that. There was the trail, sure, but there was also the memory of undiscovered countries. Harry had set his own trail, and that was in his new being. Yes, that sounded close to a feeling. He was different, a hero. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time had made him that last, at least.

Once... twice... three times a hero. Would this be the last?

Hermione held a legend in her arms, a mythic hero of a fantasy story, only this was no story, and Harry was real. His life was real, cruel, and unfair.

And beneath it all... power.

Raw, untamed. He could wipe away worlds with a thought and a gesture. To be his enemy... there could be no greater mistake. Only Voldemort left now, and the legions under his command. Did the Dark Lord exude this same feeling of greatness, of power and unchecked strength?

He must, Hermione thought. To still exist and defy Harry, Voldemort must truly be his equal. Oh Harry... do you finally die today?

"Ease up, kid," Harry said, not unkindly, and pushed Hermione back a step. "Now listen, you and Ron have parts to play yet. I don't know what, or how much you'll have to sacrifice, but the author of this story has always asked a high price from us good guys. Show the bastard you're equal to it, okay, show him you won't be broken. Do it for yourselves, for a happy life together. Above all, don't be afraid."

"We can't live without you, Harry," she replied. "Who will stop the nightmares?"

Harry chuckled. Sounded insane. "This'll be a walk in the park, you know. Keep smiling, stay safe, and look out for one another."

"Sounds like you're saying goodbye."

"Nowhere I can't come back from"

Hermione shuddered. "Oblivion?"

Without a pause, "We'll see."

There are many worlds... yet they all share the same twilight.

"We're going down swinging, old friend."

"God Himself would expect no less from you, Harry."

Long stalks of swaying yellowed grass brushed at Harry's legs as he walked alone towards the malignant cloud of darkness spiralling above the earth on the plains of North America. No, not alone, Ethan Rafe was there alongside him. Invisible to all save Harry, the fragmented soul and memory of a good man kept pace with the Darkslayer.

"Do you have any idea what you are doing?"

"Some... enough."

Closer to the mass of dark energy, Harry could see human forms milling on the ground in its shadow. Death Eaters, mayhap vampires and other servants of the creature that resided up in the cloud, summoning the Demons from their eternal prison. Lord Voldemort.

"He doesn't understand enough, does he?" Ethan asked, gesturing towards the cloud.

"If he did, then he'd know all of this is unnecessary. He's still trapped, still thinking what we do is a type of magic. If he knew, then he'd just wave his hand and with a thought bring the Demons through, or create a monstrous army of his own."

“Are you sure? What if it’s a bluff?”

Harry grinned. “Then we defy or die. You know, same shit different day.”

The cool breeze messed Harry’s hair about his head. Ethan’s was, of course, untouched. The breeze carried with it a scent of decay, of death and destruction. Oh well, nothing new there.

“Really going to end this?”

“Maybe... in Oblivion.” Ethan put a hand on Harry’s shoulder and drew him to a halt. Calmly, Harry met his eyes.

“Yes?”

Ethan didn’t flinch at the crawling streaks of red that were claiming Harry’s emerald eyes. Turning the whites to crimson spheres. “This Oblivion... you can’t come back from that either, you know. It is *non-existence*.” Ethan paused, waiting for a reply... until the penny dropped. “But you don’t intend to come back, do you.” Not a question.

“It may undo all the damage I’ve caused... Oblivion, Ethan, is complete and utter non-existence, wiping away all traces of my consciousness, my soul, my life. Anything I’ve ever done, or will do, or could do – it will all be erased from the fabric of creation. None of this would have ever happened.”

“You’ve done so much good, Harry.”

“Creation’s better off without me.”

“What if it’s worse, what if there’s no one to stand against the Enemy and *everything* ceases to exist.”

Harry shook his head. “It was my fault the Enemy awoke, because of the scar link connecting me to Voldemort across time and space. The link that eroded the Boundary and the Stream, allowed the demons to break free with Allarius, the devil, at their head. My fault. If I choose non-existence then that never happens. I’m taking responsibility for it.”

“And you’ll take Voldemort with you?”

“Two birds one stone, but that’s not all...”

Ethan frowned and held Harry’s gaze.

And when it hit him, it hit him hard.

The penny hadn’t fallen far enough, now it did. “You... no...” Words failed him. He took a moment to collect himself. “Harry, this is cruel genius and harsh *insanity!*”

“It’ll work though. You see, Ethan, you see now...”

Ethan did, and he was once again awed by Harry Potter. At first glance he may seem to be nothing more than a warrior, a hero, but he was cunning, brave, loyal, and smart. His plan, this final plan, would see to it that....

“When I take Voldemort into Oblivion, I’m also taking the Enemy, taking all of Evil into non-existence,” Harry whispered. “The Enemy would never have existed. The Creator would never have fallen. The universes and all levels of all strands in creation would be free of annihilation. It’s... its perfect.”

Ethan silently agreed. But would it be as simple as Harry made it out to be? There was still Prophecy to contend with, still thoughts and imagination enough to destroy everything before this end he had planned. And Voldemort would not go quietly, if at all. Also....

“If you do this, Harry, you’re taking me into Oblivion as well. You never even asked me if I would accept non-existence, even if it is to save everything.”

Harry tilted his head and tapped Ethan on the chest. “Did I have to ask, Rafe?”

Ethan shook his head. “No, I’ll do it without hesitation – that’s why it’s down to us – but it would’ve been better to have been asked after so long.”

“You’re right. Forgive me.”

“Worlds wouldn’t....”

I wanted to kill him for what he's done.

You wanted revenge?

No, I wanted justice.

Chapter 30 – The End

Part II – World's End

You took my bruised and battered heart
and gently nursed it back to life -
you steered my mind
through half-forgotten memories
and filled my soul with brand new dreams -
you chased away the shadows from my nights -
then all the love in me flowed out to meet your warmth
until I feared the rosy glow
would kindle such a blaze
which uncontrolled
could burn the fragile bond of friendship,
or even worse, might show
my convalescent heart needs love and care
far more than either of us know -

~~ Nanushka

hero : 1 a : a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent
endowed with great strength or ability **b :** an illustrious warrior **c :** a man
admired for his achievements and noble qualities **d :** one that shows
great courage

2 a : the principal male character in a literary or dramatic work **b :** the
central figure in an event, period, or movement.

You were once the Harry Potter, a hero.

evil : **1 a** : the fact of suffering, misfortune, and wrongdoing **b** : a cosmic force

2 : something that brings sorrow, distress, or calamity

3 a : morally reprehensible : sinful, wicked <an evil impulse> **b** : arising from actual or imputed bad character or conduct <a man of evil reputation>

I would have rather seen my world, all worlds, in ashes than surrender!

sword : **1** : a weapon (as a cutlass or rapier) with a long blade for cutting or thrusting that is often used as a symbol of honour or authority.

2 : coercive power.

Twilight be damned. I was never your pawn.

defiance : **1** : the act or an instance of defying : challenge

2 : disposition to resist : willingness to contend or fight

Why are you kneeling in the dirt at the end of your destiny, Darkslayer?

soul : **1** : the immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life

2 a : the spiritual principle embodied in human beings, all rational and spiritual beings, or the universe

3 : a person's total self

4 a : an active or essential part **b** : a moving spirit : leader

5 a : the moral and emotional nature of human beings **b** : the quality that

arouses emotion and sentiment **c** : spiritual or moral force

Let the heavens fall, I'm ready.

damnation : **1** : to condemn to a punishment or fate; *especially* : to condemn to hell
2 a : to condemn vigorously and often irascibly for some real or fancied fault or defect **b** : to condemn as a failure by public criticism
3 : to bring ruin on

You think it's almost over but it's only on the rise...

salvation : **1 a** : deliverance from the power and effects of sin **b** : the agent or means that effects salvation **c** *Christian Science* : the realization of the supremacy of infinite Mind over all bringing with it the destruction of the illusion of sin, sickness, and death
2 : liberation from ignorance or illusion
3 a : preservation from destruction or failure **b** : deliverance from danger or difficulty

Every story must have an ending.

????

In the beginning of the Return of Twilight, every being in every universe in all of creation felt something good and pure, something that had been missing for aeons, slip back into place. Something decent, undeniably *right*, returned. Call it Twilight, call it Hope, call it *God*. Whatever it was, someone had set to right the greatest mistake ever, and all would be well. The End had been averted, cataclysm avoided, non-existence negated.

For the little girl wandering through the valley on a planet that was lost in some far away corner of an anonymous universe in the long, never-ending strands of existence, the feeling of *contentment* with the world, the scent of *good* on the air, the sound of *light* in her ears, had come not so long ago – mere days.

She was only young at eleven, and before the feeling of *return* (like most beings in creation) had not really known that something had been terribly wrong with existence, having been born and lived her entire life in that *wrongness*. Now she knew, and was wholly glad it was well. This was no conscious feeling, just something that felt warm in the heart.

A hero had set all to right, she found herself thinking in a daydream, a basket for berries tucked under her arm. All would be well.

Marie found him on the bank of the river just before sunset, in the twilight, down where the best blueberries were this time of year. They grew entwined with the thorny white rose bushes, and were always the juiciest berries in the valley come spring.

At first she thought he was a ghoul from deep in the earth, that had swam up from the ocean several hundred miles to the east and died in the sunlight, for her father had told her of such pitiful creatures, but once her curiosity overcame her fear she drew closer to the bloody and messy thing on the riverbank, and saw in fact that it was a man... a boy. Clothed in rags and mud and dirt, blood, yet human.

Surely he was dead, and Marie was sickly curious, having only ever seen a dead man hanging from the gallows in town, and only once then from

across the square. His green eyes (like emeralds, she thought) gazed lifelessly at the pebbled shore. They did not blink, nor did the boy's chest rise and fall to indicate he was drawing breath.

Having moved closer, Marie would have been more alarmed if she had in fact seen his eyes blink or if he had taken a breath. Running clean through his chest, through his heart, was a sparkling silver sword that glittered in the twilight. Gems encrusted the hilt, and streaks of blood marred the otherwise ethereal finish of the weapon.

She'd have to run and tell father, for this boy had been murdered....

Don't, a voice whispered in her mind. *Remove the sword.*

"*What...?*" she barely whispered.

Remove the sword.

The voice was sweet, soft, and yet left no room for defiance. The words seemed to shake. It was joined by another, and another...

Sword... remove... the sword... the sword... remove—

Remove the sword... save the Darkslayer... sword... salvation—

Last chance... for redemption...salvation... remove... sword...

Marie gasped and dropped her basket of berries as the full blossoms on the white rose bushes seemed to sway in the wind (yet there was no wind) and bend towards the broken figure. The flowers seemed to be trying to uproot themselves in order to reach the dead boy.

The voices in her head grew louder, more demanding – *REMOVE THE SWORD* – no longer sweet but urgent, almost *fearful*.

Marie realised tears were coursing down her cheeks, but they were *pure*. She herself was terrified, but sure. This all felt right, everything felt as it should, so she took a step nearer to the body on the bank, and then another. All was well, this was supposed to be. Forces beyond her control were telling her that this was all right. No forces she could hear... beyond the voices that she knew were the roses... but their message was clear nonetheless.

This was right.

Still, her nerve almost failed her.

She leaned over the boy, looked down at his messy and matted dark hair, at those lifeless eyes in his lolling head. She saw a deep gash on his forehead, a ragged cut in the shape of a crude lightning bolt.

He must live! she (the roses) thought.

Her hand closed over the hilt of the sword, and it was cold – freezing – she winced at the touch, and dreaded what she had to do next. Already, with just her small fingers around the handle of the blade, she could feel the awful *resistance* of the weapon embedded inside of the boy. It was *in him*.

She'd need both hands and all her strength to pull it out.

This is him, she thought, and pulled the sword up. White-hot light ran like blood from the wound. *He set all to right*. A glimpse of the history of this sword ran through her mind, all the years and all the wars, the evil it had destroyed – the Evil – and this knowing almost destroyed her mind. But humans are strong, resilient, and Marie was young yet.

For a few brief minutes, this small girl (on an unknown world we shall only visit once more) had become part of the forces that surrounded and defied the threat of non-existence.

She pulled the sword out of the boy, it was almost as tall as she was – but light – and let it fall to the ground crusted in dry blood, glad to be rid of its tainted touch, its inconceivable history.

A good strong breeze pulled dozens of petals from the myriad of white roses and they swirled around Marie and the boy (*singing!* A thousand, thousand voices of the dead and of the lost). She was suddenly afraid, for she knew the boy would live. He would awaken here, with her, and then what would she do?

Life returned to his eyes and the spinning vortex of petals began to slow and fall to the earth. The light running from the wound through his heart stopped, having healed the damage. She heard his first shaky, rattling breath and felt her legs give way beneath her. The ground was warm, and although gripped by vicious fear, Marie felt safe this close to the boy.

His eyes were alive but unfocused, his head turned now towards the falling petals and the azure twilight beyond that. Marie was sure he didn't see her.

Almost below hearing, he was saying something, whispering under his breath. She leaned in closer.

“...*not over...*” he said. “*Not over yet... could all fail again... Ways of Twi...*”

Harry Potter gasped as life fully returned, and as always it was *pain*. He screamed and his entire body convulsed, his back arching and his feet kicking up a spray of cool river water.

He had died, and it had been *final*. Christ, he *remembered* all that had happened in the Last Battle for Creation.

Ethan?

Not a whisper...

ETHAN!?

He was alone.

It had all ended, *everything*, but it wasn't over. Not for him. In the end, he had to go on alone...

God, it had been so long – over a century of battle – and yet it now seemed like the blink of an eye.

The End.

What needed to be done?

By the sheer force of his will he had held Creation together against the encroaching Oblivion. It had cost him his life. Yet he now lived again, for what purpose?

Redemption... salvation...

Because he was The Boy Who Lived.

It had all happened so fast. He remembered when it truly began to end... when all had been lost so all could be saved. He had not been alone, he had had Ethan in his head. They had been walking together towards the Dark Lord on the North American Plains... towards the portal he was opening to release the demons onto the world...

What had happened next? It was all a blur...

No.

He had fought.

The greatest battle of all time, and he had *fought*.

Yes... back at the beginning of the end...

Harry went back there now in his memory; to be sure he fully understood what had to be done next....

Where
September 1st

We

Left

Off...

"Worlds wouldn't..." Ethan had said, and by all his power how *true* that was. Harry knew forgiveness would never be his, not after all the damage he had done and wrought to simply survive, to exist, and to fight an enemy he had unintentionally awoken.

The sky was close to rending itself apart under the strain of the portal Voldemort was conjuring. Harry waved his hand, trying to dispel the magic, but that was one trick he could not do, not when the Dark Lord's power rivalled his own. They were equals, and so long as one survived, the other could not *live*.

What to do then? Ethan asked.

"Head on up there, I suppose," Harry reckoned. "Throw enough power at each other to melt continents, twist reality, shatter worlds... blah, blah, blah... you know, stuff that sounds cool like that."

You sound fed up, Harry.

"Eager to end it now."

Oblivion.

"Aye."

Harry contemplated his next move. Hundreds of dark creatures and Death Eaters were stationed on the shadowed plains underneath the

cloud.

Enough to overrun this country, any country, but no real threat. He dealt in universes, after all. Still, to get Voldemort's full attention...

Harry decided to have a little fun.

And on that thought, he reached over his shoulder and withdrew his sword.

Harsh darkness was reflected in the shimmering silver-steel blade. Harry gazed down at the weapon dispassionately. With this sword he had cut a bloody-swath of mayhem and destruction across a string of mortal and, at time, *immortal* worlds. Although even 'immortality' had its days numbered now. It was one of two equal blades from two almost equal worlds. Voldemort had the twin... what had he made of it?

Harry hated the weapon, hated the power, hated the wars and fights and the *endless, endless* struggle to merely survive. But that didn't mean he wouldn't use all the means at his disposal to... well, to rock the world.

He was powerful, yes, but with this blade that power could be focused in ways his blazing palms just couldn't be. He could cut the world in two, cleanly, with one swift swipe.

How many lives over there, Ethan? I count... four, five thousand?

I'd agree.

Harry didn't hesitate another second. He swung his sword around in a devastating arc that lit the air on fire with blue flame. Howling wind filled his ears as the power erupted in the volatile blade. He thrust it down into the soil at his feet and sent a wave of energy through the earth.

All was calm for one second... two... three... fo—

CRACK!

The ground splintered, groaned and split in a large rift echoing outwards from Harry and widening to encompass the Dark Lord's army of men and foul creatures. Literally being eaten by the power, the ground disintegrated and a chasm as dark as the space between universes

opened almost instantly beneath the feet of the army.

They fell.

Harry gave it a handful of seconds, four at the most, before drawing energy into his palms and clapping them together with a tremendous *BOOM!* The rift in the earth, stretching five miles ahead of him and two miles out on either side, was *pulled* together – crushing all within its depths between two halves of a continent.

Harry felt them all die, five thousand lives in a heartbeat, and yet that was all he felt. No remorse, no nothing... he'd do anything to see that it ended today, ended soon, and ended in his favour.

If the sound of millions of tonnes of rock and earth hurling itself together was loud, then the inhuman roar of rage and anger that burst from the storm cloud overhead was deafening.

Oops, Ethan whispered, I think he knows you're here...

Crimson beams of power burst from the cloud at incredible speeds and began to hammer the earth. First a hundred, then a thousand, then a hundred thousand. A rain of destructive power aimed at annihilating Harry Potter. He threw up a shield between himself and the powerful rain, his power matching Voldemort's and thus negating itself against the barrier. The rest of the plains hit by the beams were reduced to a fiery wasteland.

Hell on earth.

The roar from the cloud continued, grew stronger, and unexpectedly the cloud *expanded*. It spread across the sky, *all* of the sky, like a wave washing across the shore. *What was Voldemort doing?*

No, Ethan said. What is the power of the Enemy doing?

It was dark. All sunlight had been blocked by the mammoth cloud that was most likely still growing, still spreading across... across the face of the earth.

Harry's part of the world was alight with crimson power, and he

wondered just how to proceed.

First things first he pulled his sword out of the earth. He didn't put it away just yet. Quite obvious, really, what had to happen next... it was why he was here, after all. Voldemort was up there, in the unnatural mist and cloud overhead. That was where he needed to be.

Harry rose by no visible means. Call it flying – he rose up and through the air towards the base of the cloud, dispelling the raining maelstrom of dark red destructive beams in his path. He spun his sword almost absent-mindedly around in his hand, and then thrust it towards the unholy heavens.

He was drawn to Voldemort's strength, to what was his own strength mirrored in evil, like a moth to the flame. Harry entered the cloud and was cut-off from the normal rules of reality and existence. He was in a lower or perhaps higher level of reality, in between the real world and the space that separated all worlds from the void that was prison to the Demons.

And it was close, he felt, to eating its way through to that void. This mist, this dark cloud was like an acid, tearing and chewing at the fabric of separate realities and alternate worlds. It only proved Harry's theory that Voldemort had no real idea of the power at his disposal. This *attempt* to open the way between the worlds was crude at best.

Harry smiled, as phantoms from his past leapt out of the smoky darkness. A Dementor... a Nundu... dragons and wraiths... vampires and terrors beyond imagining. All there to distract him, to slow him down and question his nerve. He flew through the cloud, blasted across the cloud, ignoring completely the manifestations of fear. The Dark Lord was just ahead.

Be on your guard, Ethan warned. He may know more than he's letting on...

It was eerily silent at the heart of the world's destruction. The cloud and mist surrounded Harry completely and yet it opened up in the centre to reveal a sphere of clear air *within* the mass of the cloud. It was here the final battle would begin, of that Harry was certain.

Voldemort hung in the centre of this open chamber of air, suspended on nothing just like Harry. Laws like gravity did not matter to either of them, even when they were in a place governed by the force.

It was *freezing*, and the only light came from the burning coals of the Dark Lord's eyes, and from the crimson streaks of energy that twisted and writhed across the length of the chamber.

Harry felt himself being pulled towards his enemy, Voldemort was drawing him in, and he did not attempt to fight this. It was what he wanted, after all, and audience with the devil.

He was Harry Potter, and if anyone could best the devil...

He'd done it once.

Just had to hold on to defiance, and hope.

Can't afford both...

And yet... wasn't defiance a kind of hope, and hope a kind of defiance? Hmm... there was something there, something to be examined when the fate of creation wasn't resting on the one choice Harry made next. Everything rested on his shoulders now, as he drew level to the Dark Lord Voldemort.

Worlds were spinning about his head, universes dancing across his knuckles like a falling coin....

Oh it was a familiar feeling, being this close to the being hell-bent on annihilating everything in creation so that darkness could rule.

Like coming home, Harry thought. That old familiar feeling of purest, darkest *CHAOS*.

"Only you, Harry Potter, could stand against me... only you would dare."

That voice shook with the strength of the infinite cosmos behind it. It was Voldemort, Tom Riddle, and yet it was also the being he had become. Just like Harry had become the Darkslayer, part of a dead Creator's last design to give his creation a chance to survive, Voldemort had become the Enemy.

And the Enemy had struck down God Himself at the dawn of time, and plunged existence into a slow march of entropy and misery.

The Dark Lord and the Enemy were one and the same... which led to an opposite thought.

The Darkslayer and the Creator were one and the same...

No.

Harry didn't say a word, but his hand tightened around the handle of his sword. A sword that seemed cloaked in shadow, reflecting only the darkness that surrounded the hero and the villain. No light, no stars, *no hope*.

Voldemort waited, and when Harry said nothing he continued... "You have been to Death and back, Harry, and even now an army of pure *light* souls stands ready to intercept the Demons before they can be unleashed onto this world. Your doing, I believe."

Harry inclined his head.

"No matter, Harry, no matter. All light will be extinguished, surely you must see that."

Talks too much, always does... Ethan Rafe whispered.

Harry's eyes shone in contrast to the fiery corruption of Voldemort's. White, tainted almost light-blue. The emeralds were glowing with all the defiance of the human race.

"You present, as always, a problem, Harry," Voldemort hissed. "We have gone beyond even death now, you and I... how do I destroy you, destroy your *very soul*?" The question hung in the air, the only barrier that for the moment withheld the inevitable duel between these two titans. "I present the same problem for you, do I not?"

Harry let a small sigh escape across his lips... and why not? It was followed by a short and near silent burst of laughter. "No..." he whispered, and his voice was like a beacon in the dark, a light that the shadow cowered away from. "Not when I'm willing to accept

non-existence before you tear apart creation.”

The Enemy in Voldemort’s eyes flickered with uncertainty.

“Come, Tom, this has gone on for far too long. Tell me, where is my other sword?”

The shadows solidified around Voldemort’s hand and a familiar blade quivered into existence. The sword of Gryffindor... only changed. Lines of dark disease were embedded in the metal, sickness and decay – in truth it was Slytherin’s sword now, shrouded in black rose petals.

“As we are now, these blades would not destroy us,” Voldemort said. “We could tear each other asunder and still we would not die. You *cannot* stand against me, Harry.”

Harry sighed again, and closed his eyes. “I have always stood against you... and I will so long as you exist, in whatever form I can. We may no longer be human, Voldemort, but it remains the core of us both – however much you may want to deny it.”

“*No!*”

“Yes, and humanity is *mortal*, Voldemort. It can be destroyed, annihilated. We are not immortal, *nothing is*, and that’s why it ends today.”

“You think to destroy me?”

“I do.”

“Pitiful as always. You are more the cause of Creation’s misery than I, Darkslayer. Why save what is beyond redemption. A rotting corpse has more life than your precious existence.”

“Scared, Tom? It shows....”

“*ARGH!*”

Harry had not been expecting it, and that was a mistake that cost him. He’d been expecting Voldemort to talk and gloat a bit more.

An arc of crimson power exploded from the Dark Lord’s sword, power

enough to crack a universe. It hit him in the chest and his entire body exploded in a splattering of blood and gore. His flesh was reduced to dust, his blood sizzled away in the heat of the power, and his entire physical being was simply annihilated.

Harry Potter had been destroyed.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Hermione shivered in spite of herself as she and Ron stood atop of the Astronomy Tower, looking out over to the horizon and the approaching darkness. It was nearing dark, just before true twilight, and the sight of the two friends and partners reached into the distance, as far as the slopes of the distant mountains.

Below them on the castle grounds were tents and command centres, squadrons of soldiers. All members of Harry's army. Inside the castle

Dumbledore had made it to the feast at the beginning of the year, and even now was informing the students of the impending attack. Some would want to fight, the DA, others would want to flee – home – most would want to stay in the castle.

No place safer than Hogwarts, even when the armies of the devil were on their way. And they were, Hermione and Ron could see that clearly from their place on the balcony of the tower.

The wards of the castle had been reinforced by Harry at some point in the last few months, and that would buy the light side precious time to mount their defence, give Harry time to... to defeat Voldemort (*he can do it he will do it*) and then come fight here. He said he would, and that meant he would.

The world was on fire in the distance.

A rosy glow was spreading across the horizon, and smoke obscured the sinking sun. Twilight, an unnatural twilight, had come early to this part of the world, and the reason was the second half of the Dark Lord's army, the other half to the part just destroyed by Harry in North America, was

marching on Hogwarts.

The mountains were on fire, emerald fire, and the flames were leaping towards the forest. Nothing could be done about it, the army was clearing a path of destruction to the castle. Refugees from Hogsmeade, being brought in by Ministry Aurors under Mr Weasley's orders, were arriving through the castle gates.

The wizarding village was destined to burn again.

"Can you feel, Harry?" Ron asked quickly.

Hermione frowned and then shook her head. "Feels like... like when he was gone in March. You know, like he's left the world again."

Ron nodded. "Think he's okay...?"

"No... but he's a survivor. He'll roll with the punches."

All of a sudden the sky darkened, and a vicious cloud, heartbreakingly familiar, washed across the *entire* sky. It felt like the same mess that had been visible over the North American plains.

Merlin, Ron thought with a terrible certainty, *it is the same cloud*.

Stretching all the way from across the world, what were Harry and Voldemort doing... the cloud wasn't a good sign, it suggested that the Dark Lord was winning.

Or had won.

When all is said and done... I was magnificent.

Lord Voldemort could scarcely believe what he saw. Potter's remains fell like so much waste down through the air and disappeared through the base of the black vortex. His flesh and blood, all that he was, destroyed.

Do I dare believe...? Voldemort whispered to himself. *No.*

He could still feel the boy, the fool *hero*. Behind him. Voldemort spun.

Bright silver light, flickers of electric-blue power. That light belonged to Potter. It spun and twisted into the form of a man. A flash, a whisper, the *hero*.

"We are more than flesh, Tom," Harry said, solidifying himself into his physical being as easily as breathing. "You can destroy this body a thou—"

Voldemort unleashed a wave of raw power and Potter was disintegrated yet again. Yet his presence was still felt... Voldemort turned.

"Tell me something," Harry said, "do you honestly believe you and I are bound by any rules this late in the game? You can kill me but I won't die, fight me and we destroy the world... any suggestions?"

"This world's destruction is what I desire."

Harry shrugged. "Maybe you'll get it, but there are other worlds, Tom. I've seen them, travelled millions of them. There is more life, more existence, than *you* could ever destroy."

"I could destroy it all!"

Harry clenched his fists, no longer able or willing to suppress his power. It was about to begin...

"Not," he said, "so long as I am here to stand against you."

Harry Potter exploded again, only this time it was with his own power. An electric-blue flame ran up his arms, over his chest and down his entire body. It covered his neck and his entire head until he was encased in the blue light. Two thin slits, where his eyes should be, shone emerald green.

It had long since passed time to end this madness, to put a stop to the chaos and destruction wrought upon an always fragile Creation. Harry Potter had once and for all assumed his role, his position, as the Darkslayer, as the Heir to Creation, and – above all – as the Boy Who Lived.

The power of every good and light force in all of Creation flowed through him, no longer restrained by his fears or doubts. He was, for all it mattered, truly a God.

The air cracked and twisted around his glowing cerulean form. Whips and crackles of energy tore off his body, destroying anything dark in their path as they fell through this reality and punched through to alternate ones. Harry was everything and everywhere, his power drawn from all corners of all *possible* existences.

“THIS IS THE POWER OF DEFIANCE,” he whispered, the slightest vibration of his voice shattering the sound barrier and a thousand other laws of reality. **“THIS IS THE POWER OF MY SOUL.”**

Harry raised his arm and above him a spiralling galaxy of silver sparks formed, falling into his hand and lengthening into a long, gem-encrusted weapon of the ultimate destruction. A focus for his strength, his madness, his *imagination*.

The Sword of the Hero.

“AND THIS, MY ENEMY, IS WHY NOTHING CAN STAND AGAINST ME ANY LONGER. CREATION IS MINE!”

Harry watched as Voldemort retreated, backed up, almost fell to his knees. The power washing off him was enough to shatter existence. Forget the demons; forget the corruption of the Enemy. Harry held half the power that had created *everything*.

And then the Enemy, the force inside of Voldemort, that was Voldemort, followed his example.

Unlike before, Harry had been expecting this. Counting on it, actually. There was no other way to access Oblivion than to create it – and to do that he’d need not just half, but all the magic and power of Creation. The half Tom Riddle owned because of his link to Harry Potter.

He knew Oblivion existed outside of everything. He imagined existence, creation, as an egg – with all life inside of it. Oblivion was the darkness outside of that egg. He needed to punch a hole through the shell, into nothingness and the chaos at the end of time. And that was a task he

wasn't strong enough to do with only half the power of Creation at his command.

He needed the Enemy, Voldemort, to do... exactly what he was doing.

A crimson power so dark it was nearly black flowed over Voldemort's form as the blue had done to Harry only moments ago. It covered his entire body and left both of them resembling beings of pure energy.

That is what they were.

No longer recognisable as human (not that Voldemort had been) or recognisable as anything that could exist on a mortal or immortal plane of existence, Harry and Voldemort were Light and Dark, Good and Evil, Right and Wrong.

Blue and Red.

“THIS WILL ONLY SERVE TO GREATER THE DESTRUCTION, CHANNELLING THIS MUCH POWER, POTTER. WHAT CAN YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE?”

Voldemort's own sword reappeared in his flaming crimson hand. Once Harry's, now twisted towards the darkness of the black rose.

Harry replied only one single word:

“OBLIVION.”

The Boy Who Lived was, and had always been, faster. He powered through the air leaving a jagged hole in the fabric of reality that was tinged vicious-blue along the tear. He struck Voldemort in the chest, driving his sword through the red energy that surrounded the Dark Lord and, using his own power as propulsion, headed up and into the darkness of the cloud.

Harry was screaming – Voldemort was screaming.

The Dark Lord's blade swung round and was driven through his shoulder. Fountains of blue and red sparks showered off the both of them as Harry propelled them higher, up and *out* of the dark cloud above the world and into the clear light of day and the normal, white fluffy clouds.

Two beings of energy, red and blue, tearing holes in reality and forcing apocalyptic sparks of energy off of each other. Harry knew each spark would devastate the continent beneath him. So he went higher.

Higher.

It took seconds, mere seconds.

Day faded to twilight, *to everlasting twilight*, and then to night as the stars appeared and the two fighters broke through the planet's atmosphere and entered zero-gravity, the beginning of space and the rest of the universe.

In their current state, neither of them needed to breath, or would even flinch in the vacuum of the void. A long arcing trail of nothingness, of a way between universes, stretched up behind Harry and Voldemort, both still soundlessly screaming, as they launched off each other, pulling their blades clean.

Harry glanced down at the earth, at the amazing sphere of life and energy that was his home world.

What he saw was not good, but it didn't really matter.

The black storm cloud of Voldemort's conjuring covered the *entire* surface of the planet. Crimson thunderheads, strokes of titanic lightning, danced across the monolith of dark power.

Harry heard Voldemort admiring the chaos below in his head, as the two faceless beings faced each other once again.

"LOOK AT THE WORLD YOU CARE SO MUCH FOR, POTTER. I HAVE MADE IT A TEMPLE TO MY POWER, TO ALL DARKNESS!"

Harry had seen it. Righteous fury swam through his every vein. If he let it out, that anger, it would tear the universe apart.

"I SEE IT... AND I DON'T CARE."

"WHAT?"

Harry smiled, his power-covered face did not show it, but he did. ***"THIS***

IS JUST ONE WORLD, TOM."

"LIFE YOU CARE FOR IS DYING DOWN THERE!"

"THE ONLY LIFE I CARED FOR YOU KILLED."

"YOUR FRIENDS."

"I'M TOO OLD FOR FRIENDS. ALL I HAVE IS ENEMIES AND ALLIES."

Voldemort paused. ***"THEN DESTROY IT, HARRY. SHOW ME YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO END MY WAR."***

"WE ALREADY HAVE DESTROYED IT – LOOK."

The long rip in reality's fabric that had followed in the wake of the hero and the villain had begun to grow, to reveal more and more of the darkness in the void. In that darkness Harry could see the mass of decaying flesh that was the demons, billions of them. Even as he watched now the first of those

vile creatures began to tear out of their eternal prison and descend upon the world.

Spirits of light though, souls, were also emerging from the tear in the fabric, in the canvas of this reality. The souls Harry had marched with through the underbelly of creation, and who he had left to guard the barrier to this universe. Even now those spirits, wraiths of once-life and powerful souls, went to war with the emerging demons hundreds of miles above the stormy surface of the earth.

"THIS BATTLE WILL DESTROY THE PLANET," Harry said.

"YOU WILL LET ALL YOUR ALLIES DIE?"

Harry shrugged. ***"THEY HAVE DIED BEFORE. I CAN FIX EVERYTHING ONCE YOU ARE GONE."***

"I AM ETERNAL NOW, HARRY."

"AND THAT IS A WEAKNESS. IT MEANS YOU WILL SURVIVE LONG ENOUGH TO REACH OBLIVION."

As one, as equals, Voldemort and Harry flew at each other through the air, their power touching and tearing away more of reality, burning a gap through to another universe. They came at each other again, and again, delivering blows of energy strong enough to wipe away entire countries.

Just warming up, really.

“YOU MUST BE VERY SURE OF YOURSELF, HARRY.”

Harry scoffed. ***“FOR ALL THAT MATTERS I’M A GOD BATTLING THE DEVIL ABOVE A DYING WORLD AS WE TEAR APART THE UNIVERSE. WHAT IS LEFT TO BE SURE OF?”***

“THIS OBLIVION OF YOURS – YOU ARE SURE OF IT. WHY?”

Harry laughed, and disappeared.

He reappeared under a stormy sky, still encased in power, still more energy than human, on the southern coast of Australia, inside his mansion and before the contents of his trunk. He reached in, withdrew a few certain items, and flipped back to Voldemort. He was gone less than a heartbeat.

“IT IS TIME TO BEGIN THE END,” he said. ***“THIS DEVICE IS THE FINAL BOMB. PUSH THE BUTTON THE WORLD WILL END AND THE DAMAGE TO THE CANVAS OF THIS UNIVERSE WILL PROBABLY BE IRREPARABLE.”***

“YOU WOULDN’T – YOU ARE THE HERO.”

Harry scoffed, and his glowing thumb came down on the small handheld device that was the end of the world. He pushed the button, and hurled the device down towards the atmosphere of the planet.

Oblivion had begun.

It was a shame so much must be destroyed, but he needed a **big** explosion.

“WHY?” Voldemort asked.

“SO MUCH YOU NEVER UNDERSTOOD, TOM...”

Soul.

Defiance.

Imagination.

“SO MUCH YOU NEVER WILL! FOLLOW ME IF YOU DARE!”

Harry roared and shot up away from the earth. He could feel the Final Bomb doing its job, connecting the souls, the energy, of every being on the planet – garnering all the energy it could and focusing that into a weapon, an apocalyptic explosion. It linked the demons, billions of them, and the souls of the dead – again, billions.

This blast would destroy the universe – good.

You planned for this all along, didn't you? Ethan asked. It couldn't have happened any other way.

You don't believe in coincidence, good fortune?

No. They don't exist.

Nothing is impossible, Ethan. We humans figured that out long ago.

You're destroying the only world that matters right now.

It only mattered because it was to be the key that unlocks Oblivion. It has to be destroyed.

So far we've come...

On this world, I was a kid a few short months ago.

In Time, that is a century gone. He paused. Harry...

Yes?

Maybe you don't have to accept Oblivion. Maybe you, Harry Potter, can survive...

Not even I, Ethan. Oblivion is the end. For all that matters, it is the happily ever after. A Creation where there is no Enemy, and no

Darkslayer. Think of the peace...

This existence may still need a hero.

It has to be this way. God have mercy on them, perhaps another hero will rise.

Harry looked over his shoulder as he flew away from the earth, and sure enough Voldemort followed, a streak of crimson darkness against the majesty of the star-strewn background.

Both of their trails, red and blue, cut further tears in the fabric above the planet, allowing more space for the demons to emerge. It didn't matter.

Five, Harry thought.

Voldemort hurled discs of power at his form. They hurt when they struck, but pain was nothing now. Harry turned, still surging away from the planet, and fired equal blue bolts back at his enemy.

Four, Ethan Rafe whispered.

Distance was crossed easily in his current form, and before Harry the moon grew larger and larger, the earth's biggest satellite. Streaks of red power shot past him and impacted against the surface of the moon. Giant chunks of the rock were thrust up and away, clouds of dust and debris raged out from the moon's surface.

Three.

Harry put on a burst of speed and spun around the width of the moon, arcing back towards the cloudy earth and its impending destruction. Voldemort followed.

Two.

The next part would be magnificent, Harry knew, would be the ultimate destruction the Enemy had sought for so long. There was a lot of energy about

to be released, beyond words, and Harry knew if that blast could be focused even further... deeper... for longer, then the eggshell that

housed all of

Creation would crack, and Oblivion would open.

How to focus the blast further though?

Well, there were other universes, and as he was now Harry could punch through a million of them in a heartbeat, and another million. Ha, *billions*.

With Voldemort following, he'd circle around and create an ongoing loop of Armageddon.

Cool.

The slaughter would be on a scale never seen, and never to be seen again. But then, since this story began the plot had always been outdoing itself in

terms of destruction. Harry smirked, what did it matter? This was his Creation, he was the Heir to it. The old powers had failed and he would do whatever he could to ensure its survival.

Even if that meant the destruction of every mortal universe. Those without power would have to suffer, as was the way of things – he and Voldemort were the biggest bullies in the playground. A playground they were now about to tear apart.

There was still so much that did not make sense, still so much that had to be done. Was Harry now defying the very Design that had set all of this in motion so long ago? It seemed so. The Design could only account for existence inside the shell of Creation. Harry was about to go beyond that.

ONE!

The end of the world was, at the beginning, as silent as the grave.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The battle had come hard and fast to the school. Where was Harry?

Hermione saw Ron fall and she rushed to his side, charging heedlessly through a barrage of dark curses and dark creatures.

She reached his side and saw his white robes stained crimson with the vital fluids that ran inside of him.

Blood, she thought, *it all began with blood. Harry, help us!*

“Ron...” she whispered.

He smiled. “Hermione... I-... I’m just gonna lie down here and bleed a bit, okay....”

Seconds... minutes... hours... *time* passed, and Hermione held him.

“This isn’t how everything should be,” she replied helplessly.

Ron’s fingers came up to brush her cheek lightly. Even as he lay dying, he comforted her. She decided enough was enough, and lay down next to him under the stormy sky. Strong currents of hideous lightning festered across those clouds. It was terrifying, but neither of them could care less at that moment.

“We weren’t a big part of Harry’s story, Hermione,” Ron whispered into her ear. “But we were still necessary. Can you feel it? He’s up there, fighting the last fight, for us – for Ginny.”

Hermione didn’t bother to wipe away her tears. “He’s not human anymore.”

“He wouldn’t be alive if he was. Harry sacrificed his humanity, most of it, so we could at least try to win without... all of this.”

“Didn’t work,” Hermione sniffed.

“No,” Ron agreed. “And now he must go about things another way.”

A silvery-white glow stretched from Ron’s chest and over to Hermione’s, linking their hearts. From Hermione the white light stretched off into the distance, looking for the nearest soul whether it be light or dark. The power of the Final Bomb.

“I love you, Ron.”

“I love you too, honey.”

For the both of them, the end of the world was as silent as, well, as silent as a broken heart... and a lot less painful.

Worlds break... hearts break... the latter is far worse.

There was silence, broken hearts, a prayer to God, and then nothing.

The End.

The world may have ended but Harry's story went on.

You see, it would never be over – not for him.

Save in Oblivion.

His life existed in chapters, in random bursts of event that could sometimes seem months apart, or days.

He felt there was still some ways to go yet.

As he flew towards the earth, tearing the fabric behind him and being chased by the Dark Lord Voldemort, Harry didn't flinch as the entire planet became a raging inferno. Bands of flame coursed along the tears he had created, raged up and around, back and forth.

The planet *crisped*. Became a hard shell, dead, and then erupted into flame before disintegrating down into its most basic atoms – which were themselves, destroyed.

The demons, and the souls of the dead, were annihilated also.

Harry could actually see reality twisting in on itself, groaning and tearing as the space it occupied was curved past its breaking point and just simply snapped. He'd torn the universe open onto darkness, *but it wasn't enough*.

He powered into the explosion, into the inferno, and heard the screams of all the souls he had sacrificed into this madness crying out for salvation. All the Darkslayer had to offer was the opposite. Damnation

for the innocent.

Relentless as ever, Voldemort followed.

At the heart of the disaster, of the chaos and madness, Harry *dived*.

Not through the blast, but through the *universe*.

He led the destruction onto its next feeding ground.

What if this doesn't work? Ethan whispered.

Harry heard him but could not reply. He was busy, after all, concentrating on the bloody swath of destruction he was about to bring down on countless mortal worlds.

The Enemy followed, of course it did... this destruction was what it had craved for aeons, what Harry had stopped once before, and was now creating himself. Voldemort was sure Potter had finally cracked. Human after all, and clearly insane.

What mind could withstand the *years* of abuse and torture his had suffered anyway. Potter wanted it all to end, and who could blame him... Voldemort would reshape the worlds in his image, after Potter annihilated himself. To make sure that happened, Voldemort followed.

Up ahead, as was his way, Potter dived through a tear into an alternate reality.

Harry saw white roses in the instant before he reached the next universe, and the blast following him destroyed it.

Still so much to do, he thought. ***Oh well.***

Lost in the power, Harry didn't hear his heart break.

And maybe that was for the best.

Then again, maybe it was the worst thing that had ever happened to him.

Chapter 31 – The End

Part III – Oblivion of Truth

In all things we must consider the end.

~~Fontaine

You've earned redemption, yet you won't accept it. Why?

Harry Potter had witnessed the end of many worlds, many universes, and above all many lives. He had ended many worlds, many universes, and above all many lives.

All for one reason – whether he knew it or not – to follow the Design of the Fallen Creator, to give this creation a chance to exist beyond the corruption of the Enemy. And, if he remained true, if he *fought*, a chance to love as well.

Never in the Creator's Design had there been a way to defeat the Enemy, but Harry had made that chance now in the absence of divine intervention.

He was divine.

Not God.

But maybe better described as the Hand of God, of the Creator. Even so, that didn't aptly describe him. No words could. He stood, as always, between light and dark – alone in the twilight.

With him rested all the hopes of every life form in all of creation, across all possible and realised strands of existence.

He could touch the power that governed all of the universes contained inside the shell of Creation. He could wield it like no other. That power

was corroded, dying, polluted by the waste of Evil.

Demons.

Destroyers.

Harry had made a chance to defeat the Enemy.

He had conceived of Oblivion.

The endless darkness beyond the edge of all Creation, outside of the void that all Creation occupied. A place of non-existence, of undoing, of an ending.

Oblivion...

What new horrors awaited there for the Boy Who Lived?

Supposedly nothing, but then who thought that this could have gone so far, for so long? Not I. Even Oblivion may breed some vile creation... something to force the tale to go on, to make the hero fight the good fight once more... to never let it end.

It's never over, from one hero to the next, that is the price that must be paid for daring to defy the powers that thrive on annihilation. For daring to harness the power of the soul, and for wielding the sword of imagination.

Harry has begun the destruction necessary for the very shell of creation to crack, for the unforgiving, fierce dark light of Oblivion to seep into the worlds of existence. He has no idea what he has unleashed, but to risk all now is the only option left to him. Will it succeed, or has he damned the remaining vestiges of light and life to destruction beyond anything the Dark Lord could have conjured?

The world was gone.

Not much to say about that, really, it was just gone. Where Harry's real world, his home, had been there was now a raging inferno of chaotic madness and super-heated flame clouds bellowing out into the darkness

of the universe and scorching all matter in its path.

A chain reaction of destruction in this corner of creation that would spread outwards like the ripple of a stone tossed on calm water and, if his plan worked, it would not only tear away the fabric of alternate realities, but tear through the shell that housed *everything* - every universe, every level, every stream and boundary of time and existence.

Harry intended to break through them all and cast the Dark Lord Voldemort, the Enemy, into the darkness of Oblivion beyond.

A bold plan, one requiring *worlds* of annihilation, but then goals such as this could never be attained without oceans of blood shed. Although it doesn't sound big enough, a law such as that is simply the way of the universe. Of all creation.

We follow Harry now (pray we can keep up) as he finally embraces all of the power at his command, the power of a god, and turns it on the creation he has fought so hard to save time and time again. We follow him as he plummets through universe after universe, millions of them, and yet barely a handful of all that exist, bringing with him both a raging inferno of destruction and his greatest foe, the Dark Lord Voldemort.

He is now a being of pure energy, having cast away his physical form in order to survive, to fight this last fight. He is a soul, the Soul – of the hero.

The last Champion of Twilight in this strand of Creation, for it has always been bigger than even Harry could see – but that revelation was yet to come, and it may undo him, or offer salvation and the seemingly unreachable reward of redemption.

But hey, we're getting ahead of ourselves – worlds to end first, helluva lot of 'em, partner.

Forgive me if it seems like I'm having far too much fun....

Better yet, don't forgive me, and read on – I promise a few more cheap thrills, at the very least....

If there was one person who knew how fragile the fabric of existence could be it was Harry James Potter. His life, his story, and his death had become grand, epic, and somewhat chaotic. He had gone from an exceptional magical student, to accepting the role as the saviour of creation, the

Darkslayer, and commanding the power to wipe away universes with a thought and a little bit of luck.

Having just blown up his own world, killing everyone he had ever cared about, Harry now shot down through the fireball of debris and unleashed soul-power and broke through the boundary that separated worlds and fell into a new, untouched, calm universe.

He was making his own choices, defying those that had been set in stone before him.

The maelstrom of fire followed him, as did the crimson streak of power that was Voldemort and the Enemy, the Enemy and Voldemort – partners in crime – and all at once this universe wasn't so peaceful.

It exploded.

Flame tore along its boundaries, spanning the nexus that held its centre together, and much like the collapse of a building, the universe fell in on itself, folded over into the space of nothingness it occupied. The weight of Harry's original universe, and the destruction he had wrought there moments ago, proving too much for this new universe that had been connected to one on fire.

Can you hear me, Harry?

Harry heard nothing, saw nothing, all he knew was that he had to keep pounding down through the universes, collapsing one on top of the other and then back around to the start where there should be...

HARRY?

A whisper in his ear, a forgotten name and face. He was not Harry, who was Harry? He was God, all Gods, the Darkslayer, a Hero, the Heir to

Creation. He was *Power*.

But no...

Those were just titles his sanity clung to as the darkness fell around him.

Odd thoughts ran through his mind, (through *its* mind, he had become just power, after all. If you subtract humanity from power, destruction will always follow) odd memories of things that made little to no sense, that hadn't happened and had a thousand times over.

He smiled. It was a smile that was meant to reassure, but deep down in that calm grin you could see that he knew everything had gone to shit.

Looks like things weren't turning out okay at all.

Sorry to get your hopes up, but nightmares are far more likely than fairytales.

Deep within a mind that was still human, yet still forgotten, the soul of Ethan Rafe shouted out to be heard, and was ignored. Besides Harry and

Voldemort, he was the only witness to this unmatched abandonment of sense and unleashing of terror.

THIS IS TOO MUCH! Ethan roared.

Harry did not hear him, It did not hear him, but He/It felt a sense of that thought.

An electric-blue streak of energy, Harry cut across a midnight sky above a world of strange creatures and unevolved plant life – a world mostly ocean not unlike his own – and a heartbeat later it erupted in great gouts of redeeming and damning fire. Shame, but it was just one of many to go. Harry felt the thought, and one of his own flittered across his mind – although it was senseless to him.

My hands are stained with blood, old friend. Why stop now?

Ethan heard him, was in his mind after all, and wanted to weep but couldn't. He was just a memory himself, a forgotten face in a crowded

mind... but he felt real damn it! And he would be heard.

Harry, he said, somewhat calmly, you have to stay true to the path that HAD to be taken...

Again, Harry only felt the thought, and replied in kind... ***This creation has bred terrible things, things that are undeniably bad. They must be fought, and this is the only way.***

Ethan screamed, he **SHOUTED**, to no avail. Harry's defiance would not be broken by a fragmented soul still clinging to the reality of the living. It wasn't fair. Where was the sense in any of this? Ethan felt helpless, was helpless, as the last hero the worlds had to rely on tore creation down around him.

What are you doing? he asked finally.

Harry almost paused at that, hearing more than a feeling, almost the words themselves. But no, this was the path that had to be taken – no turning back, no looking back, no hesitating. There was a loss of defiance in hesitation, and that could *never* be allowed.

I am killing evil itself.

This is death gone mad, Potter!

This is Oblivion. Did you expect roses and sunshine?

Never know when to expect roses... white or otherwise.

What you see is the only way, the only thing that can be done. The Enemy, my enemy, must be at long last cast out of our worlds.

But you're destroying too much!

Not enough, not yet...

Damn you then.

So worlds and universes toppled, and the chaos of that was deafening. There were no witnesses, no cries of outrage save those from Ethan Rafe, and they went unheeded by the cause of the destruction.

Harry scoured the mortal universes, tearing through layer after layer of boundaries that had been set in place at the dawning of Time, at the beginning of this Creation. The fires that followed him multiplied by their thousands, the explosions magnified beyond all reckoning. Soon enough the destruction began to eat through the fabrics without Harry's aid, spreading deeper and farther out into the realms of all life.

He continued his run however, bursting through hundreds of universes in a split second. Connected as he was, bearing the Mark of the White Rose, of the Heir of Creation, Harry died again and again with each universe, with each world within each universe, and with each life form upon those worlds.

He was caught in a spiral of death and did not feel a thing.

It was almost time to end this...

Harry felt half the power in Creation close on his tail, felt Voldemort through their various links. The scar link being, as always, the strongest. It was that link that had awoken the Enemy the first time, that had nearly ended all existence, and it was that link now that would see the true hero of the light achieve his final, unimaginable goal.

He had half the power, Voldemort had half the power. The destruction he had so recently wrought would weaken the shell of creation, but somehow he did not think that it would be enough to punch a hole through into Oblivion. No, that had to be his choice – and it would mean dragging an unwilling

Dark Lord along with him.

It was going to hurt, of that much he was sure. Even in his current form, where nothing physical could pain him, where even death was useless, this next move would set every nerve in his being aflame. With any luck Voldemort would feel the same, which made it worth it any day of the week.

Although days and weeks did not exist now. Time had been stopped, what with no one to observe it save Harry and Voldemort. But then in their current forms they existed in all points of possible time, and none at

all. They existed in time that did not exist. Never would make sense, but it was true nonetheless.

Listen to me, Harry, and listen well.

He churned through a thousand new worlds, some he had even visited before, and all of them were swallowed by the collapsing stack of universes chasing close behind the Dark Lord.

You've come this far, to this end, and for what?

He shot through the heart of a star, twisted himself around planets and through bends in space and time, folding the canvas of countless realities around himself and *burning* it to ash.

You can't be sure that you can stop this! Ethan Rafe screamed.

"I can do anything, old friend... There are no challenges left in my story. Just a desperate bid for an ending that will mean something after so long, for an ending that will make the journey worth the countless lives lost, and my many sacrifices."

Can you remember ever being anything other than this? Can you remember being a boy, a kid, and knowing right from wrong. For a moment forget the lives this plan costs, forget the slaughter of universes, and just think – what will happen should you fail?

"Risks have to be taken, lives sacrificed. I'm a killer, Ethan Rafe, someone has to be. Who must do the hard things?"

That's bullshit! I never intended to have such a role in your story, you know. I was dead a hundred years ago, in both the worlds you met me in. Died in what has become your personal war, your vendetta against Evil and Voldemort.

"Sometimes there is only one choice—"

Shut up and listen, you owe the dead that much. The force that was Harry Potter, that remembered his life and Ethan, fell silent. This is more about vengeance than justice. You feel hard done by, you want revenge.

“Be silent now, Ethan Rafe. And trust me one last time.”

Ethan sighed. *On all our heads be it...*

Harry arced up and through the air of a world that exploded beneath him. He spun around and was absorbed into the raging inferno of a million million universes crashing down upon one another. He embraced the fires, a fierce blue streak of lightning within a white-hot glow of extreme violent heat.

He'd brought about the end of many universes for this, and the creature that now surged towards him – the only other sentient being within an immeasurable distant, Voldemort, was revelling in the same destruction that Harry intended to be his undoing.

Harry hung in the void of the inferno, suspended in the flames, as Voldemort drew level with him.

“THIS IS MARVELLOUS, DARKSLAYER! YOU’VE DENIED THE CREATOR’S DESIGN AND SOUGHT ABOUT AN ENDING OF YOUR OWN. MORE OF A DESTROYER THAN I EVER WAS.”

“LIKE WHAT I’VE DONE WITH THE PLACE THEN...”

“THIS IS THE CHAOS FLAME FROM WHICH A NEW ORDER WILL BE FORGED, ONE OF WORTH AND POWER UNDER MY RULE.”

Harry scoffed at that. **“YOU’RE DONE,”** the Boy Who Lived said. **“WATCH WHAT HAPPENS NEXT....”**

The blue light energy around Harry erupted into a thousand lashing whips of power, spiralling up and around him, surging out behind him. He shouted, no, he **roared** and blasted through the space separating him from Voldemort, along the golden scar link that rang with phoenix song and powered himself into the Dark Lord.

Blue and Red, Lightning and Blood, Hero and Villain... they *merged*.

And it hurt more than Harry had ever imagined.

Any pain he had felt up to this point had merely tickled compared to the fusion that was taking place now, as his energy collided with Voldemort’s

and

the two of them were joined closer than ever before, closer than any two separate beings in all of time and history...

“WhAt...

...aRe...

...yoU...

...DOINg...? Voldemort/Harry screamed, cried.

Both arms of the crimson-blue energy form held a sword, one dark and one light. One a white rose one a black rose. Between them Harry and Voldemort's form was deepening, the colour changing...

Light and Dark mixed... morning and night were diluted into one another and a dusty, faintly azure light began to shine between the two of them and their matching blades:

Twilight...

“End...

...gaMe...” Harry/Voldemort replied.

And then Harry flew.

On a broom, above twilit fields, chasing forever after that always elusive golden snitch. In his mind, he flew to the core of a white rose, to the heart of a loved one and the soul of a friend... In reality, what remained of the tattered mess of existence, he flew merged with the devil through a torrent of liquid fire, hotter than all the stars in the universe, and reached for their combined power.

Fused as he was now, their two powers combined, Harry tore control away by the sheer force of his will from Voldemort. He took *all* the power. He would not be able to hold it long, Voldemort would vie for command and more than likely gain it... yet Harry could take it back, only to lose it again in a never-ending cycle of two immortal equals.

Harry had the power, he harnessed it all, and propelled himself home,

cutting back through all the universes he had destroyed, back along the main cord of annihilation.

It took only a split second. A wave of his hand and he swept away a million universes.

He and the Dark Lord once more existed within their original universe, which now resembled a very dark doom indeed.

Black flame, as slick as oil, covered existence, and the tortured sounds of tearing flesh and crushing bone were the death cries of a universe annihilated. Here things were over, here things were madness. Here were nightmares of nothingness and impending darkness forever.

It was here, that the shell separating creation from the terror of Oblivion had been pressured to breaking point. Here, above the charred remains of Harry's real world, that the gateway to what lay beneath hell itself could be *forced* open.

Oblivion, Harry/Voldemort thought.

It had followed him in the shadows since his story began, the unanswered question of what was bigger than everything, the one thing he could not survive or defy. Oblivion, the devil's demise.

For the last time against the Dark Lord, Harry concentrated his will and his defiance into raw unbreakable strength, and gathered his thoughts and being into a spear of destiny and fate.

The Hero of this story said, with the weight of all worlds behind him, of the long weatherworn trail that had led him this far disappearing back over the twilit horizon, Harry Potter said, clearly and fluently...

"Nothing can be eternal, Lord Voldemort, perhaps you're still human enough to remember defeat..."

And with that, Harry unleashed all the power of Creation against itself, and punched through the very shell that kept Oblivion at bay. All at once around him dark light began to pour through the widening cracks, splintering millions of miles across the void of destruction his universe had become.

Harry smiled grimly. Done was done, and Creation was broken.

Like a spider web, a shattered window pane, the cracks spread and ripped. A great tearing sound, a groaning, emanated from all around even above the sounds of the universe ending... it was the buckling of everything, the support holding back the fetid light of Oblivion had been removed.

It was an awesome sight to behold, beyond mere words and imaginings. Harry Potter and Voldemort watched in amazement as even the twilight glow exuded by their tangled forms shied away from the unchanging dark light of nothing.

Frantic and scattered thoughts arose in Harry's mind, yet they came from Voldemort. ***Run... flee... get away from it...*** Only now did he understand what Harry had done, and sure enough he'd realised that... ***There is no place to run, no world in all of...***

Bingo, Harry thought. ***You lose, Tom.***

I CAN'T LOSE!

Oh no?

Harry honestly laughed as he took control with ease of both himself and Voldemort and shot up towards the outer shell of creation, towards the cracks in the foundations set by a lost creator a very long time ago, and disappeared out into the darkness of Oblivion beyond...

Disappearing into non-existence, and the end of his very long life and story, was quiet. No grand entrances, or witty remarks, or even hesitation... His last thought in all of creation was one of relief, relief that he had defied the curse that had plagued his being for a century...

It will never be over, he had been told.

Well, it was.

Unknown to Harry, the cracks he had made in the shell continued to widen, and Oblivion continued to seep into the realms of all Creation, unmaking

all that ever had been as if it never was...

ThE eNd?

Still a ways to go, Harry, and nightmares aplenty...

The Truth

Ever looked at the night sky and seen a million stars? Sure you have. Ever wondered what they were, what they were doing, why they were doing it,

and if other forms of life were looking at those same stars a whole galaxy away? My money's on yes.

Imagine just for a moment that every one of those stars had a small blue planet orbiting it, that every one of those stars warmed a world that life thrived

on. Imagine how close and yet how far we would be to beings of another world, to alien life...

Humbling, ain't it. To think how small we are and how small we *could be*.

It could make you feel that God was far away, if there at all, could make you doubt a point and purpose to life... could make you succumb to the darkness, to defy no more...

Harry Potter opened his eyes and remembered everything that had happened, and knew that by all rights he should not exist. That it was simply impossible for him to be *aware* at all.

His eyes hurt, but that was nothing, and he looked up through blurry vision at a night sky dotted with millions upon thousands of millions of stars. There

were more pinpricks of light covering the canvas of the sky than there was darkness between them...

But no, that wasn't right.

He was supposed to be beyond worlds of stars and... and forgotten to Oblivion. He was supposed to have never existed.

A cold wind blew over him, lying as he was on hard stony gravel. Ashy-grey dust had half covered his body and his arms felt weak and heavy. The air

smelt of ancient parchment and rock.

Where was he?

Just where the hell was he?

Running his hands over his body he felt leather pants, a shirt of some material... he was wearing what he had last worn on earth, and he could still feel

certain items within his jacket pocket that he had collected before destroying the world.

Harry turned his head to the side and saw an amazing thing. There was a screen of ravenous fire and a wall splintered like jagged teeth, like the cracks in an egg shell. For one peaceful moment Harry had no idea what he was seeing, and then a realisation that had been centuries in the making hit him, and he couldn't even weep for the wave of despair that washed over him like a blanket of dry, bitter ash.

He was looking back into his universe, into his *entire* creation.

And the stars in the sky overhead were not stars at all. No, it wasn't even a sky...

Harry turned over onto his chest and managed to crawl to his knees. He was parched, felt powerless and defeated.

Shudders ran through his entire *human* body, down his arms and legs (both were whole, his metal leg had been renewed somehow, somewhere, somewhen) and he could not believe his eyes. No, would not believe his eyes.

He was human again, and the purifying fires of power that had absorbed his form had healed his body, made it strong and young again. He was as he had been before becoming pure energy, only better. Sparks of electric-blue power still jumped across his body, but they were less now. The power resting at bay once again.

His lips were cracked and bleeding, the air in this place was stagnant and dry, like a desert only cold. Why was there air at all? He knew what had happened, but where was this place?

“Something wicked this way comes,” he managed, smiling and falling down onto his back. Clouds of dust swirled up around him.

He was on the edge of Creation, just over the edge, on some balcony overlooking Oblivion. The fiery hole to his right was a doorway back into his

creation, the crack through which he and Voldemort had—

Voldemort!

Something plummeted to the ground nearby, striking the dust and disappearing, but Harry didn't notice it as he rose aching to his feet and scanned this place for the Dark Lord.

His body was free of scars and the bone-weary aches of a thousand forgotten injuries, yet one scar remained, and from the lightning bolt scar, if one

knew just how to look – and Harry did – a thin golden cord stretched outwards into the darkness, *away from the edge of creation*, out into true Oblivion.

Harry followed it, staggered along on sore feet encased in tough leather boots. God, he was tired. He didn't have to take many footsteps, barely a dozen, before he reached the jagged edge of this dusty outcrop sprouting outwards from all Creation. The golden scar link disappeared over the edge, lost to the darkness of non-existence, and Harry could not feel his enemy at all.

"It's over then," he said, and sat down in the dust with his legs dangling over the edge of Oblivion. "I win... fancy that."

He cut a striking figure against nothingness. Creation burned behind him, yet up and out in the darkness the truth of all life burned as brightly as any star, and he merely sat slightly hunched, one hand against the ground for support, staring at what he had come to realise were something quite a bit bigger than stars.

"It is strangely peaceful here," Ethan Rafe said, appearing next to the Darkslayer. As always, he remained trapped in Harry's head. "This is incredible."

"I won, Rafe," Harry said, without emotion of any kind. He may look human, but he was still a monster responsible for the death of life beyond measure. "He's gone."

Ethan shrugged and sat down next to his companion of a hundred years. Together they glared out at the truth. "What did you save though, that you didn't destroy?"

Harry laughed, it echoed across nothing. "I just fall now, Rafe, we just fall... and none of this happened. Everything is restored without me ever existing... well, ever existing as the person I am in this story."

"Me, too – we're joined at the soul."

Behind both men a thin crack spread up along the outer shell of Creation, and fiery light shone from within it, from within the inferno that was still tearing apart everything.

Ethan said it first, the truth.

"They're all Creation's, aren't they?" he asked Harry, gesturing to the far off points of light that had first been mistaken for stars.

"Millions of them," Harry agreed with a nod. "Not just universes, but *entire* Creations. All of them existing in defiance, within, Oblivion. Didn't see it coming... but it fits, doesn't it...."

"What do you suppose they're like? Any of them?"

Harry shook his head. "There will be wars, there will be death... there will be life and love, good and evil. Do you think any save the Creator Himself has ever seen this truth, Ethan? We are truly seeing something...."

Harry noticed that he still carried the Mark, the rose tattoo that twirled up his arm and blossomed in a brilliant white rose... No matter, when he jumped all would be undone.

"No one will ever know, though, and we won't exist anymore...."

"Ah, well that's for the best, old friend."

Ethan had to agree, although that did not stop him wishing there was some other way. Harry wanted this, wanted nothingness and to restore all that he had destroyed. No – that wasn't right. He didn't care about the destruction, the loss of life and worlds... he only wanted to forget. If his forgetting, his

Oblivion, restored everything lost then that was that, just a lucky side-affect of his non-existence.

He was done – mind, body, and soul.

Ethan should have known Harry Potter better than that.

"Shame you die a virgin though, Potter," he smirked. "Bet you never thought you'd hear that on the precipice of complete and utter non-existence."

Harry found a smile. "You know, I once thought that you might be the Creator, Rafe, hiding out in my head... keeping me going when it was tough."

Ethan snorted. "You wouldn't need me for that. And yeah, I knew you thought that... this change your mind?"

"Completely," Harry said, gazing at the multiple Creations glittering away in the far distance. "I think the Creator didn't fall, He left... and he trapped his Enemy within our Creation, left us the power in His Design to fight it... then went off to create all these other creations."

“Why? Do you think He sees us right now?”

Harry shrugged. “I think the truth of everything, Ethan, is that life is always going to be bigger than anything we can understand. I mean look, *just look*. God, or whatever, made all of this... people just have to have faith it was for a reason.”

“That it’s not just a test,” Ethan nodded. “There a heaven, you think?”

“Not for me. I’d be bored.” He sighed, thought of Ginny, and felt nothing “Come on then, we jump on three.”

“As easy as that?”

“Last little thing... and as usual we have to do it ourselves.”

Ethan stood and gripped Harry’s hand, pulling the hero to his weary feet. They both stared at one another for a moment, thinking nothing much really, and then turned to the edge.

“This doesn’t seem right now we’re here, you know,” Ethan whispered.

Harry wasn’t listening – he was peering down into the darkness of nothingness as if hypnotised, gazing at something only he could see, some thought only he could hear... Ethan followed his gaze and thought he saw a shadow, a different shade of dark to the void beneath him, flitter across his sight.

“What was—?”

A rush of darkness, the whisper of an echoing scream, and a hint of madness. There was something down there, in the nothing.

“Oh,” Harry said. “I guess it was too easy, after all.”

“Voldemort,” Ethan spat. “He still...”

“Yeah...” Harry tapped his scar. “He’s dangling by a thread, but he still exists.”

Ethan felt an old familiar weight come crashing back down on his shoulders. “Well, what do we do?”

Harry paused and began to shake his head, then nodded. "I don't know. I honestly don't."

"But you have an idea, something that might work, I can feel it."

"Sever the scar link, Rafe."

"How?"

Harry turned back towards his creation and began to speak, but words failed him. The wall of fire, the hole through which he could view his whole universe inside of the shell of creation, was no longer there – it had grown. The view was now one of completely decaying flame, stretching up around the outer shell of existence and across its boundary to both sides.

The flame had spread, the shell was breaking – he had unleashed too much power.

His Creation was falling apart, destroying itself.

"This is your doing," Ethan said gravely.

"I..." Harry seemed lost. He wasn't. "Right then, got to work fast." A slow yet serious smile, dipped in insanity and mischief, spread across his face.

"How heavy would you say Creation is, Rafe?"

"Harry..."

The ground began to shake and the vibrations churned up clouds of dust. Greater chunks of the shell began to fall away and land on Harry's rocky balcony at the end of everything. They disappeared, dissolved back into the nothing from which they had been forged so very long ago.

Harry walked over to the edge of creation and turned to face the darkness that was coming, the something wicked just beyond sight. He turned his head and his neck cracked, he clenched his fists. Ethan had disappeared back into hiding within his head.

"Come on, you bastard," Harry whispered. "I'll take you apart with my

godforsaken bare hands.”

It came out of the darkness over the precipice of nothing, it was no longer Voldemort, merely a mad and twisted husk of his former self. A thing raving from being tossed into Oblivion, yet not totally destroyed. A being of pure hate and chaos tore through the air, flowed along the scar link with skeletal arms outstretched, knowing only that Harry was there and that he could be ripped apart.

They collided once more, as flesh and bone – not as energy – and Harry was hammered into the dusty ground. Large sharp shards of the shell rained down around him as he wrestled in the ash with Voldemort, a screaming twisted creature with no remaining vestiges of humanity.

On top of Harry, Voldemort raised one arm as if to strike him dead, and in his outstretched hand Harry’s old sword appeared, turned the colour of a killer black rose. Voldemort screeched and brought the blade crashing down.

Ever the swordsman, Harry called for his blade and brought it up against the other. A wave of power washed outwards from where the blades collided, in a flash of blue and crimson sparks.

Power was building, greater pieces of the shell were collapsing and Harry could hear his creation crying out to be saved, to be renewed. He couldn’t die here, he had to not exist.

Yet so long as he was connected to Voldemort he would.

Power was indeed building.

Torrents of flame were escaping through the cracks in the outer shell, wild arcs of fire millions of miles thick, disappearing into Oblivion. The scar link was resonating with that power, growing visible even to the naked eye. A strong golden cord connecting Harry and Voldemort.

The infamous lightning bolt scar erupted in a fountain of blood which splattered across Voldemort’s face. The Dark Lord seemed to revel in it, and he brought his blade down with increasing ferocity.

Harry roared and pushed Voldemort up and over. Flipping himself up

onto his feet, Harry swung his blade down, parried it around Voldemort's and cut his arm off at the elbow. The Dark Lord screamed and the remains of his arm fell to the ground. The sword disappeared, only to reappear swinging wildly in his other hand. Black blood oozed from the stump of his arm, sizzling like acid.

Harry gritted his teeth, moving his sword with the ease and patience of an expert, of a thousand wars and a hundred years of experience. He knew the life of his entire creation was on the line here. He forced Voldemort back towards the edge of Oblivion.

The edge had grown closer, and Harry could see why. This platform was disintegrating.

Some force, the nothing of Oblivion, was pulling the rock away in a steady stream, like sand trickling down through an hourglass. The balcony was being eaten, getting smaller. Soon they would both fall – yet connected as they were it did not seem Oblivion could destroy them. The link had to be,

at long last, severed.

Yet it was growing stronger. A thick band now, of golden light, was as real as a rope hanging between them. A pressure was building in Harry's head, and he could hear Ethan groaning.

Ethan... What had been his purpose? He was not the Creator, although that had been hinted at, no... why was he here at all? Did he have some part to play even yet?

That felt right.

Instinctively right.

But what damn it? What?

The pressure built and it was getting harder to deflect the frenzied blows coming from the darker blade. He couldn't stop thinking of Ethan. Harry missed a step and a deep gash was opened in his arm, across his chest and up to his neck. Hot blood began to flow. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt the sting of such a clean injury.

It helped him focus even through the pressure pounding into his skull. It felt... God, it felt as if...

I'M BEING FORCED OUT! Ethan cried. *Harry, we're separating!*

It was true.

After a hundred years as one, of being trapped inside Harry's head. The growing strength of the scar link, coupled perhaps with the unmatched strength of all creation ending, was forcing the soul of Ethan Rafe from Harry's mind.

It hurt, but then what didn't, when you got right down to the bare basics... time slowed, now that it had a reason to exist again.

Harry knew that this was happening for a reason. Everything always did, it was just recognising that reason that was the problem. A chance to make a difference was being made here, and it could slip by as easily as water through a sieve.

At long last, after all these chapters of their lives (and deaths) together, Ethan Rafe flowed from Harry's mind in the form of a silver mist, ethereal, pure... soul light.

Harry's mind felt lighter almost immediately, and also lonely.

Then time accelerated...

0-100 in less than a second.

Voldemort swung his sword down through the air, cutting another long gash across Harry's chest. A criss-crossing web of bloody cuts marred his new and shiny body. A deep gash had been opened across his leg, and he was bleeding quite severely from a cut on the side of his neck.

Harry felt certain that to die here, outside of Creation and on the shores of Oblivion would make it somewhat final. He could still lose here.

Ethan solidified next to him and he seemed more real than he had done all the time Harry had seen him outside of his head. He was real, he was alive – flesh and blood. Voldemort took a swing at him and cut a vicious line across his eye.

Ethan screamed, shocked, and fell back clutching his face. Hot blood squeezed between his fingers as he landed in the dirt. He was drawing ragged breaths. Having not had to breathe for a long time, there was some difficulty there.

Harry and Voldemort faced off for the final time, and as always they were equals. Harry had more skill with a blade, that was true, yet he was wasted and tired. Whereas Voldemort had been driven mad by the nothing he had been lost in for a short time, and madness was a new kind of strength altogether...

Still Harry held his own, as they hacked each other to pieces gash by gash.

Between them, the scar link was a strong golden cord as thick as Harry's arm. It was a real, tangible thing.

"HARRY, WHAT ARE WE DOING?"

Tremors shook the ground with increasing ferocity (what remained of the ground, most of it had been eaten away, a bit more than half lost to Oblivion)

and it seemed as if the entire mass of Creation was shaking and falling apart.

That was exactly what was happening.

Ethan looked from Harry and Voldemort, felt a brief flash of hope at the unbroken resolve on Harry's face, and turned to look at the boundary of creation. He was blinded in his left eye from Voldemort's strike, but he only needed the one eye to see the souls of the dead converging inside the maelstrom of fire and chaos within Creation.

They stood out well against the dark flames – silvery blue spectres of the dead, countless billions of them from a million worlds and universes, all watching the final battle between light and dark, all gazing out at Harry and Lord Voldemort, all knowing that their creation was falling apart...

Ethan didn't have the faintest idea what to do.

Harry did. He knew exactly.

The constant blows and power behind the strikes of their swords had finally succeeded in tarnishing the ancient metal, even chipping the blades and scarring their lengths. The swords were old and done with, just like their masters. Everything was falling apart. It seemed that one of the rules of

Oblivion, much like in the universes, was that entropy would inevitably claim everything.

Harry jumped to the side, dodging a kill-strike from the Dark Lord and took a large step back. He knew what had to be done now, knew the only thing that could be done. He chanced a quick look to his left and saw Ethan struggling to his feet. He smiled and nodded at his only companion during the very dark times.

Voldemort moved in to strike again, shortening the length of the scar link between them.

Harry ignited his sword, called upon his power and the blade erupted in raw blue flame. "ETHAN," he called. "YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO, BUDDY!"

And with that, he tossed his flaming sword through the air over to Ethan, exposing his chest for one critical moment that Voldemort did not waste.

The dark blade, the Black Rose, pierced Harry's chest and was driven directly through his heart.

Voldemort screeched in triumph, just as Ethan Rafe caught the sword of Gryffindor, of Potter, of the Darkslayer with a spin and, acting only on instinct, on what he felt he had to do, leapt forward with a cry of apocalyptic fury.

Harry fell to his knees, and seeing his companion of a million worlds kneeling before the Dark Lord increased Ethan's fury a hundred-fold. The blade's fire, that raw blue flame, turned the darkest navy blue – it was nearly black.

Ethan swung, cutting down directly *between* Harry and Voldemort – and

through that magnificent golden scar link, that cursed link that had set these two on the course for the end of all time and life....

It was a clean cut, swift and sure.

An explosion of power, and an instant of blinding white light.

Ethan ducked, thrusting the sword into the rock and holding on to it as the explosion of air and power propelled Voldemort and Harry apart.

Harry flew backwards towards the shell of creation with its army of watchful souls. He didn't fall back in. No, with the sword still through his chest and heart he hit the dust, creating a rift right up to the edge and stopping there, one arm dangling back toward the fires. His skin was dirty and covered in blood, and began to blister from the heat.

Voldemort, still screeching what may have been triumph or fear, disappeared back into the darkness of nothing, and after a long moment fell mercifully silent. There was no sign of him at all – it was done.

When the dust settled... well, when Ethan could move across the shaking rocky outcrop without fear of being blasted into Oblivion, he ran towards

Harry, leaving his sword embedded in the stone of nothing. The corroding edge was closer now, Oblivion claiming it all – it would claim the sword

too, and good riddance.

Ethan pulled Harry back away from the flames. His skin was burnt, although not badly – just too much sun. Ha ha... There was nowhere to pull him too, though, the only other way led to Oblivion.

Which was what he wanted.

"Ethan...." A whisper, barely heard over the crumbling of all universes. "Plans have changed, mate."

"Christ, Harry, I thought you were dead."

"Just a flesh wound," he joked, running his hand wearily over the handle

of the sword protruding from his chest. His

eyes fluttered open and took a moment to focus. He wasn't breathing, but then... "I'm not mortal enough to die right away from this. Still... still got the power."

Ethan nodded. "Here, let me." He grasped the handle of the sword, intending to pull it out.

Harry slapped his hand away. "Leave it—ha, the sword through my chest is keeping me alive—how sick and twisted is that? Creation still falling to pieces then?"

"Aye."

Eternal defiance in his eyes, Harry sighed. "Help me up," he said.

Harry swayed on his feet and his eyes swept the darkness for any sign of Voldemort. He hadn't seen him go over, disappear... he had to be gone this time, for sure. He turned his gaze around to the monumental cracks in the outer shell of his creation, and felt only a momentary shock at seeing the thousands of trillions of souls gazing back out at him.

"One creation among many," Harry whispered. "Made by God out of the void... yet the void still shows through."

How to stop this?"

"Any ideas?"

"One."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Ethan paused. "Don't keep us all in suspense."

Harry smirked, and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. "But that's how I keep you all interested."

Chapter 32 – The End

Part IV – Final End Game

We came, we saw, we kicked its ass!

~~Bill Murray

“You know, Harry, most of the time we’ve taken it upon ourselves to change the course of history... things have gone terribly wrong.”

Crimson bursts of flame roared through the gigantic cracks in the shell of all Creation. They spurted outwards and then dissipated into the nothingness of the oblivion from which everything had been wrought, and from which everything would one day return – unless a hero made a stand.

Made a stand and defied, *defied goddamnit*, annihilation.

Standing on a crumbling balcony, a rocky precipice that was slowly dissolving yet still connected to the outer shell, Ethan Rafe surveyed the near-mortal Harry Potter with a wild feeling of anxiety churning in his stomach. It had been a long time since he had felt anything so human... yet human he was again, reborn into a body after being forced from Harry’s mind at long last.

“This is my destiny, Rafe... my...” Harry smiled and sighed. “Not destiny, is it?”

Ethan shook his head. He didn’t think so either. “No... you’re here, we’re here, because we *chose* to be here.”

“Destiny had nothing to do with it.”

“Right.”

“Right.”

The trembling beneath his feet hitched up a notch and Ethan was almost

knocked to the dusty ground. There was only a few square metres of this rocky outcrop left, here on the edge of creation, and he did not know what Harry intended to do to save the cracking shell and all it contained, which was *everything*.

And still, gazing in through the large gaping maw before him, more souls were joining those hovering in the inferno Harry had created to finally destroy

Voldemort, to finally rid Creation of the entity that had been known as the Enemy, as the Destroyers, as Allarius and a million million other incarnations in countless other lives... and stories. They were human souls, the last guardians of twilight, and they waited to see if the Boy Who Lived would save

Creation, or let it fall...

Would this be the end of all stories...?

After all, it was just one Creation among many. The far off glittering spheres in the 'sky' of Oblivion were testament enough to that.

How small Harry's war seemed now, when compared to the infinite size of Oblivion and the many Creations it contained. Small... yet it had been vital. His was the Creation the Creator had been annihilated in, that the Enemy had been imprisoned in to wreak untold pain and suffering upon the life

inside.

Shit, it was a sad story. Doomed before it really began. A story that couldn't have a happy ending, you would think.

Keep thinking that.

"So what to do we do, Harry?" Ethan asked, human once more. He, like so many others across so many miles and years, turned to the Boy Who Lived for guidance. To be shown the way.

"We fight, Rafe," Harry shrugged. "We fight, and we do it in style. Things have changed – you don't have to cease to exist. You don't have to enter

true Oblivion. You can jump back into Creation, if you wish.”

Ethan asked, “And you?”

“I’ve millions of memories I don’t want, old friend. And a thousand old scars. I crave peace on Oblivion.”

Ethan held his gaze, and held it firmly. “You won’t find peace in Oblivion, and you know it. All you’ll find is nothingness...” Ethan thought about that, cast his mind back over the battles and wars. He sighed. “Yet I think, for you Harry, that’s enough. For you... peace and non-existence is the same thing.”

“It’ll have to be... what could be greater than non-existence?”

To that, Ethan had no reply.

Their balcony was now nothing more than a small jagged jut of rock, scarcely three metres long and half a dozen metres wide. And it was still fading away. If Harry was going to do something, he’d have to do it now. Under the watchful eyes of all the humans in death and the mortal universes, of their souls now banding together at the end of creation, Harry made his final move in a very long tale.

“One last dance, Darkslayer?”

“There is no darkness left to slay, save that which I carry with me – and Oblivion will see that destroyed.” Small spheres of white light began to flow between Harry’s fingers as he raised his arms over his head and stepped towards the edge of the precipice that looked back into Creation, back towards the silent legions of souls.

He was cut to all hell, bleeding to death, yet pain was only in the mind, and he’d suffered wounds far worse than this. Harry knew he didn’t have to survive anymore, just one more task to complete... and then nothingness. A part of him, and not a small part, was looking forward to that.

His power, the power of All Creation, flowed into his hands and encased his arms right up to his shoulders. As always it was hot, almost painfully so, yet pure and raw – anxious to be used. With Voldemort cast into

Oblivion, finally gone, he no longer had to fight with *half* the power in existence.

He had it all.

And it was intoxicating... maddening... it blasted the shreds of his sanity into dust. Dust and ash.

That is why, with absolutely no fear whatsoever, with no turning back, Harry took a step forward, his final step, and his foot came down not on the rocky outcrop, but on an invisible step in the air – hovering just on the border between Creation and Oblivion.

Funny though, the power of All Creation did not feel as impressive as he'd thought it would...

His arms came down from around his head, stretched out now to either side. Thick and pure beams of white light shot out from his hands and, travelling faster than light – travelling as fast as thought, which over any distance is *a/ways* instantaneous – they circled the *entire* circumference of the outer shell of creation until the ends of the beams gripped the nearest cracks, then spread upwards and outwards – searching for further cracks.

In Ethan's mind, the enormity of what Harry was about to do finally clicked over. He recalled something Harry had said earlier, just before Voldemort had returned and cut him open, forced Rafe from his mind.

How heavy do you think Creation is?

It had seemed like a joke, an insane comment... but...

From Harry's outstretched hands further ropes of light spread out and upwards, in and downwards – in all directions seeking out the crumbling edges, the cracks and fissures, in the shell of All Creation. All freakin' Creation.

Behind him, not dead yet but soon to be, Ethan Rafe smiled. "You crazy bastard," he whispered. "You amazing, crazy bastard."

A thought that wasn't his own entered Rafe's head. It was Harry.

Choose your future, Ethan Rafe. Walk past me and into death, into the afterlife – continue to exist and one day be reborn in the new

Design... or hold your ground, and accept Oblivion, nothingness.

Ethan honestly did not know what to chose – he had been a soul trapped in another's body for so long that he had long since forgotten the agony of choice. It was Harry, sometimes with his guidance, that had made all the choices for the last hundred years. Choices no one should have to make, but he'd bared the responsibility well – heroically.

"Do you know what awaits me if I go back?" he asked the Saviour and Heir to Creation, Harry....

The sword thrust through Harry's chest was sparkling with the radiance of loose gemstones scattered across a twilit sky, drops of glowing crimson blood sizzled to the dusty ground, across the border of Creation, and shone like fire rubies.

To go back you have to die... and join the army of souls watching me now.

Ethan smirked. "Damned if I do, annihilated if I don't...."

Best odds we ever had, Ethan.

The tattered remnants of Harry's clothes hung to him almost to breaking point now. His arms were stretched out as far as they could reach, and his neck was arched backwards. It looked as if he'd been nailed to a cross... crucified.

Damnation ain't so bad... once you get used to it, Harry continued, projecting his thoughts directly into Ethan's human mind. *You even stop feeling guilty after awhile. Go home, Rafe, you don't want Oblivion. That's not—A-ARGGH!*

Harry roared in pain and fury as Creation tried to break free of his grip and fall apart. He screamed, he fought, he defied, and *pulled* the cracks closer together, to seal it...

Gaps remained though, his strength did not seem to be enough.

GO...“RAFE!” Harry screamed, not just with his mind. *I HAVE TO TRY AND CLOSE IT NOW. CHOOSE LIFE, OLD FRIEND, YOU CAN*

MAKE SOMETHING OF IT!

And Ethan Rafe did. On the border of nothingness and chaos the boy who had died twice, but now lived again, who had held the values of both good and evil, right and wrong, in his mind and soul – chose to die a final time, and mayhap be reborn into a world of humanity. With Harry and Voldemort outside of Creation, the world would never know of the war that annihilated all life.

It would never have happened.

Those few short steps across the dusty arid rock to the fiery chasm that led into Creation were the longest Ethan Rafe had ever taken in over one hundred years. He had walked with Harry, sure, yet only in the mind. Time to die.

As he drew level with Harry Potter, Ethan placed a mortal hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently, affectionately. Harry turned his head and his eyes were completely red with blood. The emerald was faint, yet what was there seemed to glow. They were eyes belonging to the damned, to the near-broken.

“Good luck, Harry,” Ethan managed... other words seemed to fail him. What was there to say?

We never imagined the impossible, not really, Ethan, we never imagined that we would survive. Yet you can.

“By choice,” Ethan nodded. The fires of creation were so hot, so *close*. It would kill him instantly as soon as he stepped back in. He turned his back to Creation and reached out to Harry. A spark of energy leapt off the Boy Who Lived and knocked his hand back.

Ethan swore, he was bleeding. Pain was altogether unexpected in Oblivion, yet Creation was close enough for some of its laws to affect him.

Go and tread once more familiar paths, old friend, Harry sighed. There

was a weight in that sigh that struck a cord with Ethan, made him stop and pause.

Ethan shrugged, and Harry smiled. It terrified him, shook his very core... something wasn't right... something was...

"Harry," Ethan said slowly, "that's the smile you use to reassure people when deep down you know everything's really gone to shit."

Harry nodded. "Goodbye, Rafe."

An invisible force of energy pushed Ethan back, it came from Harry, and the Darkslayer's lifelong companion *shattered* against the flames of Creation. For a moment his physical existence held steady, eyes wide with shock and anger, and then a blue light sped out and away from the body –

Ethan's soul – and the body was blasted to nothing.

Ethan was gone.

And Harry spun, letting go of Creation to dance with the devil one last time.

Voldemort came howling out of the darkness. Well, something vaguely resembling the creature that had been Lord Voldemort came howling out of the darkness. His once snake-like face was pockmarked with burns of disintegration, his eye sockets were hollow and bleeding yellow pus down his ragged chest of peeling flesh and horrible decay.

Oblivion had begun its work on the Dark Lord, yet his defiance had ever been as determined as Harry's – and the human he had been, Tom Riddle, demanded one last parting blow...

Humans could be stubborn. Wouldn't survive if they weren't.

Voldemort flew at Harry and grasped the hilt of the blade sticking out of his chest and thrust it in deeper, twisting at his heart.

Harry held fast, his feet pushing back against the blow. It hurt, but the pain was far away, as if it was having trouble coming through. Harry had just become very good at ignoring it.

Fire flew from Voldemort's fingertips and twirled down the length of the sword, scorching Harry's chest, yet he remained unmoved, almost ethereal in his calm, as his hand slowly moved down around his back, and grasped the hilt of something he had been saving for this moment, had he but known it before...

Prophecy was about to be completed. Prophecy set down in a story a lot smaller than this one, a lot less epic yet at times a lot more meaningful.

Thank you a final time, Ethan, Harry thought, as he withdrew a dull silver dagger from the waist of his tattered pants.

A dagger that had been all but forgotten for over a century, handed to Harry by a dying Ethan on a war-torn street in Hermione's home town, back when they had both been *just* human, a dagger with an impressive history... stretching as far back as Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin.

In the battle that had seen Gryffindor defeat Slytherin and thus promise that one of his descendents would *always* be there to battle the descendants of Slytherin that took up the cause of *purifying* the world of those deemed *unworthy*... In that battle, prophecy and oaths had been forged that had not

yet been fulfilled – until now.

Harry remembered Ethan's words clearly... remembered that day all too well...

"Promise me, Harry. Promise...." Ethan raised his hand and grabbed the scruff of Harry's shirt around his neck. His breathing was coming in short desperate gasps now. He was at the end. "Take the blade... You have to... have to promise me, Harry. Promise me you'll send the Devil back to Hell. Promise me you'll defeat Voldemort...."

The dagger of Slytherin, that had cut Gryffindor's cheek in their last battle, almost killed the Guardian... Harry had long since ceased caring or marvelling at how everything always came full circle, how everything was connected...

Send the Devil back to Hell...

Ethan had spoken words of prophecy, for here they both were on the edge of Hell, of Oblivion...

The blade of the dagger began to shine with sizzling power as Harry swung it around, almost *threw* it, at Voldemort. It took him in his *heart* and it seemed the disintegration claiming the Dark Lord happened all at once.

Voldemort screamed and, at long last, every atom and molecule of his existence was blasted to nothing, with no hope or prayer of returning this side of Creation.

Harry stumbled back but didn't fall. He stopped and stared for a moment at the dead air where Voldemort had hung, and looked down to the dull dagger now lying in the dust of Oblivion and shook his head.

"Done is done," he said, and turned back to Creation.

It had begun to crumble again without his power to hold it steady.

A heartbeat passed... another... although Harry's heart no longer could beat....

Prophecy was done, *prophecies* were completed – balance had been restored and the bounds of oath and destiny that had weighed Harry down for decades finally left his shoulders. At long last, he was free.

A few minutes ago when Harry had realised that Voldemort was not defeated just yet, that he had been trying to heal Creation with most but not *all* of the power that he and the Dark Lord had shared for all of their lives, and had forced Ethan back into existence, Harry knew that he could never seal the massive breaches in the shell without wielding every last drop of strength...

He had it now.

By God, did he have it now....

And it was nothing, really, when he weighed it against all that he had done and seen.

He stepped into the breach and stood half-in and half-out of Creation.

The heat and flames of an entire *creation* ending were tremendous, yet paled against the roaring fires of power that surged through Harry's very being. He was immortal, mortal, infinite, finite – everything and nothing as all life and strength that ever was, ever could be, and ever will be burst out of him and *fled* across the surface of Creation.

He picked up where he had left off and began to knit Creation back together, seal the cracks and restore the damage done. Oceans of power flowed from him, rippling across the shell and smoothing out the crippling damage, yet entire oceans were only single drops from the tap of strength that now resided in the Boy Who Lived.

The greatest feat ever undertaken and no one was alive to see it, let alone urge Harry on.

Without Ethan in his mind, and with Oblivion caressing his back, Harry had never felt more alone.

It was awful, really, ending one's life alone. Harry once again felt bitter hatred towards the unfairness of existing. Is this what his entire life and existence amounted to, in the end? To die as if never having existed, to have done so much that won't matter, that *can't* matter?

He shrugged, having already made his choice to not exist, yet it still stung that it was the only option he had left to him. Such plans he had had when given that second chance at the Ways of Twilight, plans to unite the world against Voldemort... yet the greater evil in Creation had found him again, had been reborn as he had, and had forced him to use more and more power until....

Well, until he stood here, wrestling with the slippery pieces of egg shell, trying to puzzle out how they all fit together so Creation didn't fall apart and

Oblivion didn't seep in... a single hole, a single gap, and it would all end anyways, with the hero already annihilated and forgotten....

"Aw, hell," Harry muttered... he'd never been that good with puzzles – Hermione had been the brains behind all that back when he'd been a kid. He supposed just forcing it to fit would have to do – after all, with a big

enough hammer anything could be jammed in to place.

Was it his imagination (always a fickle, overactive thing) or did the streams of blue souls appear closer?

Harry unleashed wave after monstrous wave of energy, healing the wounds he had inflicted against existence. It was enough power to do anything, *be* anything, create or destroy *anything*. He had enough strength to attack those far-off twinkling stars in Oblivion that were the outer shells of other

creations, other multitudes of universes and worlds where anything could be possible, where everything had already happened or could happen – was about to happen.

Power enough to get lost in, to forget the core values of one's self, and just simply *explode* with that strength.

Harry basked in the heart of a maelstrom, in all the strength and energy that ever could be. It scoured his thought, set every nerve afire with crippling pain... yet his face was set in fascinated ecstasy, in joy and rapture at the heat that flowed through his veins.

He was no longer himself – no longer even remotely human – he was just Harry, and what a monster he had become... worse than that which he had fought so long and so hard to defeat....

As Harry changed the intent of his power began to mutate, to cripple instead of heal. The flowing oceans of power spreading across Creation's surface no longer soothed but destroyed, caught the fabric of existence in an icy vice-like grip and *squeezed*.

Harry, just Harry, screamed in joy and pain – absolute power corrupts absolutely.

This was the outcome of living by the Sword.

This was the price of unbreakable Defiance.

This was the end of a broken Soul.

This was victory without redemption!

Of power gone mad... Harry thought – only he wasn't Harry, he was God, the Creator – he was He, He was All, and had *never* been human.

But then no... Creators created, they nurtured and *guided* – what he was doing was destroying, annihilating.

He was the Annihilator, the Destroyer – and where was the hero to challenge him, the brave human destined to make a stand?

Well, he was right there, of course. Harry was that, too.

Tumbling through an ocean of icy power, soaring across a night-sky lit with the fires of unmatched strength... a very human mind belonging to one

Harry James Potter fought against the goliath energy trying so damned hard to scour his living memory from existence...

Light and dark. Shadow and Flame. Good and Evil....

Saviour – conqueror – hero – villain. You are all of these things... and yet you are nothing. In the end, you belong to neither the light nor the darkness...

YOU WILL FOREVER STAND ALONE!

"In twilight," Harry said, washed up on a beach with sparkling waters and a bulging purple sky.

Naked as the day he was born, Harry calmly accepted the pull of the tide as it rolled him slowly yet inexorably up the beach which seemed to stretch on forever.

There was no meaning in this, no meaning in his life anymore...

An image of himself holding the entirety of Creation together, grappling with total power with a supreme look of pain and pleasure on his face flittered through his mind, but quickly faded to dim remembrance of something that may or may not have been important at some point...

Hours passed into days into weeks into months into long years and

nothing changed... Harry lay washed up on the never-ending shores of hell itself and only moved at the mercy of the tide. The sky remained painfully purple, like swollen bruises, the ocean continued to sparkle like scattered diamonds...

Yet so what?

He didn't sleep, didn't eat, scarcely thought of anything... he was dead and as good as even if this had been some form of life and not a moment stretched into an eternity inside his own mind.

Well, what else did you expect?

The very fact that hell would need to exist for Harry to be there is a numb, useless point – we all have a universe of our own terrors to face anyway, and all of them begin and end in the mind.

Harry's were just a lot more vivid – and time had no meaning to an immortal mortal – time was never constant anyway, it looped in circles so thin and thick that beginning and ends were impossible to see...

"So, here you are..." a voice said one day - a day no different from any other for Harry, yet days didn't pass, only unmeasured time...

It was a voice full of contempt, anger and greed – a selfish voice, a mean voice... a familiar voice.

"Been looking everywhere for you," Harry Potter said, leaning down in the tide over Harry.

The Harry wasting in the tide blinked for the first time in years and looked up at himself – at a face not wasted in the sun, at a face strong and arrogant.

Harry looked up at himself as he had been on so many worlds – unbreakable.

"You know, Harry," Harry said. "I can't destroy everything whilst even a spark of my wretched humanity remains alive..." He paused, looking down at himself. "However weak and dull that spark is..."

Harry's mouth worked soundlessly trying to reply, but his muscles had

long since failed him. He managed a few tired gurgles, even raised his hand a

few inches weakly, before he gave up.

“You’re thinking why would I – why should *you* – want everything destroyed? The answer is quite simple....”

Dark Harry waved his hand and lightning tore apart the unchanged purple sky – fiery rocks of destruction rained down into the sea, sending it into turmoil. Hell more in name now...

“I fought so hard,” Harry said. “For so long, and no one cared... no one that *mattered* – there was no one that mattered. We were it, Harry, in the end. With no Creator, with Evil itself defeated... We became the highest Authority there was. Who was there to report to? Who was there to tell us well done – you did good, kid – and pat us on the back? You know what we did, Harry, when we fought Evil and won....”

Dark Harry threw his fist into the watery sand beside them both, sending power down to the planet’s core, breaking the world....

What did we do? Harry wondered – naked Harry, guilt-ridden and meaningless Harry – thought. Human Harry.

“We stopped something that was dead from being buried.” Dark Harry laughed. “You see, don’t you? Without a divine presence, without a God... our Creation was doomed from the start – it was dead, and we stopped Evil from finishing the job of laying it to rest. We prolonged the agony....

That’s all we’ve ever been good for.”

No... Human Harry (*Light Harry*) thought.

“Yes. Come now, you can lie to yourself all you want, but in the end the truth will out....”

No....

“Well, no matter,” Dark Harry said with a small shrug. He was trying to sound blasé, yet Light Harry could tell he had been unnerved by nothing

more than the look in his pale eyes. A look that defied the meaningless that had clung to him for so long.... “Sit tight and let me slit your throat, good buddy, that’ll end this pesky existence thing once and for all.”

Dark Harry raised his hand and a silver sword appeared as if by magic. The Sword of the Hero, of course. Light Harry looked at it as one would anything designed to end one’s life – with mistrust. Though not with fear, never that – he would not be afraid of himself, not any more...

The sword came down with the handled ease of a master swordsman. Harry slit his own throat, cut his own bloody head off – only the cut was so deep that it didn’t ever bleed.

Killing one’s humanity is never a messy affair – it is a cold thing, a terribly thing yes, but only cold.

Harry killed all he had ever been, because it had become weak and held him back. His power, the true power, could travel the darkness of Oblivion, absorbing all other Creations and growing ever stronger, so long as he was not tied to anything as *weak* as mortality.

Dark Harry laughed as he died, as his head was taken away by the pull of the tide and this mind-world buckled and tore itself apart.

“Now that wasn’t at all nice,” a voice said from somewhere behind Dark Harry.

Dark Harry spun but there was no one there. Only....

“You’re neither light nor dark, Harry – you can’t kill something that has never existed.”

Again, Dark Harry spun – and this time came face to face with... *himself*.

Neither light nor dark.

No, this was Harry in his prime, dressed to kill in leather pants and tight-fitting black shirt pulled over corded muscle. He wore a coat of black material that shimmered in the light, made his amazing emerald eyes shine brighter than the sun. Twin swords crisscrossed the sheathes tied around his waist like a pair of old revolvers.

Dark Harry's eyes bulged and he stumbled back, aware all at once that this couldn't be real and of the massive waves of strength – not power – but normal human strength rolling off of this other Harry in droves.

"In most of us humans, Harry," Harry said, "there are no clear lines of good and evil. Light and Dark. There is just perspective and opinion, and even that is almost always biased... yet there are a few individuals, the heroes you might say, who are clearly defined, but not as light or dark...."

"Twilight...." Dark Harry whispered, groaned. "You're Twilight Harry."

"That's all I've ever been," Harry said. "You don't exist, my friend, not on your own... you are a part of a whole. And I'm that whole."

Dark Harry screamed, screeched, and threw himself at Twilight Harry with his teeth bared. Twilight Harry opened his arms and welcomed him as an old friend, a close brother. They merged as one, darkness into light – to twilight, and the world erupted in fountains of horrendous chaos.

White roses burst up from the ground underneath Harry's feet, and the battle was won, for good or ill, once again. He smiled, reality flickered, and he came back to himself and to the *real* world...

"Harry Potter," Twilight Harry said. "You better get your act together, mate, because there's no coming back from this one."

Reality ended.

Harry felt as if years had just gone by in the seconds it had taken him to become lost in the power, only to find himself again at the heart of the vortex, in the centre of the whirlwind....

He stood on the threshold of Oblivion, and all around him were the souls of those he had lost, those he had killed, and those he had tried so hard to

save – all one and the same, in the end, for everyone he ever knew or

ever could know had died in his inferno to rid Creation of Voldemort, and himself.

Harry was himself again – for a moment there he hadn't been, he was sure, and his mind had played tricks on him. But he was himself, just Harry Potter.

Twilight Harry

Creation, the outer shell of everything that existed, had pulled his arms tight to either side with the strain of matching his strength against the chaos he had unleashed. Harry felt his arms tearing from their sockets. Yet they held still, just as the shell did – without Harry, the destruction would have caused the annihilation of everything as soon as it had reached the tip of the shell.

As it stood, Harry was the cause of, and the only thing preventing, the entire destruction of existence. Quite a lot to be getting along with, you might think... especially on your own.

God I miss the good old days of Death Eaters and vampires, house points and time turners... those were the true adventures. This is just insanity, of power gone mad...

Here, in this story, life was a terrible thing to have. It came with pain, and only pain. Pain was how Harry knew he was still alive, in some form or another.

He couldn't technically be called human – yet he was, in more ways than one...

He was the last human alive in all of Existence, and he stood on the border of non-existence.

Now that they were close enough Harry could make out the faces on the nearby souls, blazing a brilliant cerulean blue in the fires of the end of the worlds.

Of course it had to be the souls of those he knew, those he cared about... of the trillions upon hundreds of trillions of souls to reach this place, this battleground for all Creation, it had to be his old friends – the

people he had started his adventures with so long ago were here at the end.

Full circle.

As always.

“Ron,” Harry whispered, as the disembodied and pale ghost of Ronald Weasley floated past his face.

Ron’s face was calm, filled with understanding. A slight smile and a glint of mischief sparkled in his deep soul-lit eyes. “This seat taken, mate?” he asked Harry gently.

“I’m sorry I killed you, Ron.”

Hermione was next, followed by Luna and Neville, Dumbledore and the rest of the Weasleys, all the members of the Order of the Phoenix, Remus,

and his Hogwarts professors...

Harry apologised to them all, and they all said what they could, what they saw fit...

Ginny wasn’t there... not yet.

Sirius Black followed Remus to speak to Harry, and alongside him were two people Harry had never really met, no matter how many worlds and universes he had been to, how many *versions* of these people he had befriended.

Never before had he met his parents.

James and Lily Potter.

The *real* James and Lily Potter, that had belonged to his *true* world.

“Can’t let you out on your own for five minutes, can we?” Sirius said softly. “Not only do you go and unmake every world that ever was, but you break the realms of death, too, with your little stunt here.”

“Nothing is impossible, Sirius,” Harry said. It seemed like the right thing

to say, although the why of it escaped Harry just then.

"Sweetheart," Lily Potter said, "this is madness."

"Madness is who I am, what I am...." Harry whispered. "Were you expecting something more?"

"We've watched you suffer, Harry," James Potter said, all of them now bordering the edge of Creation. "We've watched you fight and die so many times, only to rise again undefeated – defiant even beyond your last breath. You've come so far, fought for so much, and now you plan to destroy yourself... your very soul and essence."

Harry nodded. No sense or reason in denying it. "Creation is better off without me, without Voldemort. It'll live that way."

"Without Voldemort, perhaps, yes," Sirius said. "Without you... nothing can survive long without a beating heart, Harry. Remember the Ways of Twilight... they were dying, and only you could find them..."

What are you saying, Harry wondered. Although he knew, he knew too well.

"I can't live another day," he said with such strain that the entirety of existence *shook*.

All fell silent, the furious explosions in the inferno seemed to fade to nothing... and sound was nothing, for what was there to say? A single voice broke the quiet, a single thought and defiant whisper...

"I love you, Harry James Potter, with all my heart. You need me and I need you."

Oh and here was the hardest moment of it all, the last strain to Harry's current existence. Ginny Weasley, lithe and beautiful, even as a pale ghost, hovering now before them all, her eyes soft yet commanding, her soul light burning as fiercely as his fiery hair once had.

Harry found himself missing her hair, missing the strength of will he had when he had fought to love her, fought across worlds to love her, because she was special, somehow.... She was the one. In a human life,

a human existence, she was his....

He missed the smell of wildflowers in her hair.

But now... oh, Harry.... But now....

"Leave me, Ginny Weasley," he said, colder than ice. "I've never needed anyone, ever. I've fought my wars alone. What makes you think you can help me? That, after all this, I need you?"

"You do need me," Ginny whispered fiercely. "You do. Because you need someone to stop you. Look at what happens when no one is there!"

This struck Harry. Harder than any blow the Dark Lord had delivered in his time. No point in denying it, she was right. "I love you, you know. What I feel for you has never been bad, never been angry or violent or hateful. It could only be love, and it's more powerful than I am."

"Then let us have a happy ending. Fix it, Harry, and come find me again..."

"Are you saving me, Ginny?"

"You're hopeless on your own."

Harry sighed, yet his defiance did not waver (as always) and Creation held another moment. Because he *wanted it to*. He was the Darkslayer, the beating heart of Creation and the Design of existence itself. Was he really considering going back to the madness? Yes, he decided, he was. Oh God save him now, her perfect eyes were going to change everything... all of their eyes, the entire army of souls... they wanted him back.

"I can't promise this will ever be over," he said roughly. "That some monster or demon won't appear and destroy what we build together. I can't promise you a safe life with me in it."

Ginny didn't hesitate. "Being loved by you makes me feel safe."

Few words. Awesome meaning. Enough to turn the course of history...

And just like that, life returned to Harry James Potter. A will to continue, a rejuvenation of his strength and defiance. He had no idea what the future now held for him, but he wanted to see... maybe an early death, where the death was final and the peace eternal. That sounded nice, but not what he

really wanted. What he really wanted was a chance at simple happiness with a girl he had fallen in love with a *very* long time ago...

"After this, Ginny," Harry whispered, his muscles straining now to keep existence together. "After this things may be different... I may not be able to bring you back if you die, if I die... the rules will bind me again, because that's the only way I can continue to exist... and I'll have enemies."

"It doesn't matter, so long as you're there."

Harry smiled, slow and steady... "I want you to know, that no matter what I would walk into Hell itself to keep you safe."

"You've already done that, time and time again..."

"And I always will, but shush now... I'm trying to deflect attention away from my obvious heroism." He sounded human again, and that was *good*.

Ginny grinned. "Go save the world then, Harry. Will I see you soon?"

"When Time exists again, you'll only be waiting heartbeats. Stay safe, Gin."

"You too, hero."

Power exploded, worlds erupted.... LIGHT blinded everything.

And Harry Potter once again made the choice between what was right, and what was easy.

He sealed Creation – fixed the cracks in the shell.

It was done.

Only... he had made the choice that was easy.

A wretched and miserable Harry sat down on the cusp of Creation, on the remaining rocky outcrop that clung to the vast, dark shell of all things... he had sealed the breach, with himself still on the outside.

The sword through his chest was corroded, glittering only slightly now as his power faded and the darkness of absolute nothingness faded in around him.

Worlds, universes... all crumbling, all lost and running...

"I'm tired," he said, and his words died on the air, travelling nowhere and meaning nothing.

His hands stroked the ash and dust beneath him, the only things to exist in this place now beside himself, and neither of them for much longer.

Harry sighed.

He supposed it had been the final straw of his humanity, lying to those he cared about – promising Ginny he'd return when really planning to annihilate himself.

Sad, really, damning and unredeemable.

His only comfort was that as soon as he no longer existed she would never know of him, or his broken promises.

Harry felt a pang of regret at that.

For in the end, as he dangled over Oblivion, Harry realised a quite terrible thing.

If—no! *When* he did this, gave himself up to the darkness, his life would have amounted to nothing.

This entire story would've been pointless.

"I am... was... Harry James Potter," he said. The sword wound in his chest, and the mangled flesh around it, stung a little as he said that. As if Voldemort were still twisting the blade.

"I was the Boy Who Lived, I was the Darkslayer and the Heir to Creation." He smiled softly. "But all that's done with...."

The ledge he sat upon had almost wasted away to nothing. Harry looked back over his shoulder and place a hand on the outer shell of Creation. The substance it was made of... whatever it was... gave way beneath his hand, and at the same time was as hard as stone.

Harry pushed at it, waved his hand through smoke and pounded against a rock hard, completely unbreakable wall.

Opposites... everything had an opposite. Creation itself was an opposite of Oblivion.

"No more," Harry whispered. "Goodbye, Gin...."

Harry fell – and was no more in Oblivion.

....THE....END....

*If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream,
and have a flower presented to him as a pledge
that his soul had really been there, and if he found
that flower in his hand when he awoke—*

Aye, what then?

~~Coleridge

"Wake up, Harry. Oblivion or not you're not going down the path I set for you, the path we all need you to follow, and that can't be allowed. People need hope, after all, hope in a *happy* ending."

Harry's eyes opened slowly, and he found himself in the oddest of places – someplace... normal. Someplace very *muggle*.

He was seated in a chair next to a bookcase – a fold out chair with white arms and blue felt stretched tight across the frame. Cheap, tacky – on sale at Kmart. The bookcase was packed with books, in no particular order – more books lay scattered about the room, stacked in tilting piles

and hiding under discarded clothes – blocking the windows, even.

There was an open wardrobe full of clothes hanging on wire hangers – more books, more stories, spilled out of the bottom of the closet.

Oddest of all though....

“Who are you?” Harry asked.

There was a young man seated in another chair nearby. A much more comfortable chair from the looks of things. It was a leather office chair, and the man swung slowly back and forth on the pivot, his hands gripping the wooden desk in front of him.

On that desk was a laptop computer – *even more books* – and all manner of stationery. Dozens of little yellow stickers with illegible notes jotted down on them clung to the desk in various places, even on the screen of the computer... Harry shook his head – *this was non-existence?*

“I know what you’re thinking,” the young man said. He was dressed in a simple pair of blue jeans and a white cotton singlet. Scruffy brown hair and light blue eyes, the man had a few days growth of stubble on his cheeks. “You’re thinking how can this be? How is this non-existence? You’re also thinking I look a little thin and lanky.”

“You know me?” Harry said carefully. He himself was dressed in Hogwarts school robes – something he had not worn for God knew how long. There was no sword sticking through his chest, no wound or pain or anything. He felt good, actually, healthy and uninjured.

“I know you quite well, Harry,” the young man – not much more than a kid, really, just out of his teens. “Well, I should know you, I wrote you. I’m the writer, you see.” He paused – almost expectantly. “You do see, you just don’t want to. No, don’t worry about it, mate. I’m in your head or your in mine and this world is the real world. Ha, funny that...”

Harry watched him shake his head and turn back to the computer. A slight frown appeared on his brow as he (the *writer*) tapped the *delete* key on the keyboard a few times, undoing something not wanted.

“Writing is almost always hit and miss, Harry,” the writer said. “Half the time it seems like your struggling, the other half that writing anything is a waste of time...” He paused again, and frowned absently. “Then there’s the moments, some of which I’ve had with you, that the words seem to write themselves – where worlds and characters come alive on the page, roses bloom, you might say, and you can hear the howling of the wind and smell the magic on the air.” Quite excited, the writer was on the edge of his seat. “Unfortunately, getting swept away in the words like that does not always happen – rarely happens at all, actually, but it’s worth every hour struggling through countless pages of words.”

“How did you bring me here?” Harry asked.

“Hmm...?” the writer looked up. “Oh, yes, well... I took a liberty there that readers may vilify me for, but then *you*,” he waved his finger at Harry accusingly, “went and got caught up in Oblivion and left me no choice. What kind of ending is it if the hero just no longer exists and none of the story ever happens? It’s not an ending at all, really, I might as well have not bothered writing in the first place.”

“You... wrote me?” Harry clenched his fists slowly, and his eyes began to sparkle... dangerously.

A flush of red rose in the writer’s cheeks. “Well, not even...” He shrugged. “I *borrowed* you, after your fifth year. What I wrote about you is called fanfiction, yet it became something more... And I’m not the Creator, by the way, not really – just the pen, mate, that’s all I am. Just your average Joe, you know. You can call me Joe, by the way – short and sweet and rolls easy of the tongue...” The writer sighed, he looked at Harry and his shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry, I’m using too many words. To be honest your story’s half a million words longer than I planned already.”

Harry for the first time noticed a tattoo on the writer’s, on Joe’s, left forearm – where a Dark Mark would usually rest... It was of a sword, and a thorny white rose curled up around the blade and bloomed aside the hilt.

Harry understood all too well where he was, what was happening. Sunlight, *real* sunlight, streamed in through the cracks in the blinds. Outside was a world, a world this *boy* lived in, worked in... where he was

just a story, a *fiction* – and probably more often a *fanfiction*.

This was the world beyond the world, beyond all of Creation. Harry threw himself up with a growl and knocked his chair back – all that was *his*, all that he had known, was in the head of this *writer*. He knew it was true, as true as the scar on his forehead, as true as the life he had led and the wars he had fought.

“You *bastard*,” Harry spat, and reached for his power. Only there was nothing there, nothing at all... he was... he was human, muggle. Normal. Powerless yet alive, here in this world. “You take from me all that I am,” he said, looking down at the writer who hadn’t moved an inch. “You destroy all that I love with a few words – *you press buttons on your machine and entire universes crumble!*”

“That’s one of the reasons you’re here,” Joe said, quite calmly. “I wanted to apologise, for letting all of this get out of hand... for putting you through so much that you chose non-existence over a happy ending with Ginny. That’s what I planned, you know, way back when... but Oblivion was your choice, all yours.” He chuckled, it was sad, in a way. “Always defiant, even against the very words of your story.”

Harry surged through a range of violent emotions – most of which saw him tearing the writer’s throat out with his bare hands. But no...

“Why else am I here?”

Joe blinked. “So you can go back, of course, and we can have a happy ending. I just wanted to talk with you first, tell you what you must do. You broke away from me and took your own path a long time ago, Harry, but my ending is still possible... if you want it bad enough.”

“I don’t—” Harry shook his head and raised a hand to his scar. It was burning fiercely.

“Ah, yes,” Joe whispered. “We don’t have long. This breaks all the rules of good storytelling as it is. But you can’t exist here, not as a real person.”

“I’m nothing....” Harry croaked. “My entire creation was never anything.”

“NO!” Joe cried, and it was the first outburst of anger Harry had seen from the suntanned and brown haired writer. “You are so *wrong*, Harry Potter. Don’t you know who you are by now?”

“I...” Harry’s world spun, his head ached viciously. “Harry Potter!”

“That’s right,” Joe said kindly. “That’s who you are. Whether you exist or not, whether in one Creation you’re the Boy Who Lived, in another the Darkslayer – whether, as in my world, you are only alive in stories, you are *Harry Potter*. And just hearing your name can change the course of history. There are very few places left in my world where your stories can’t be found – the true stories, written by a woman who lives far from here....” Joe frowned, shook his head. “No matter how you exist you always, *always* matter. You change worlds for the better.”

Words tumbled through Harry’s head, words of a story much like his that went a lot differently after the death of Sirius in his fifth year. He saw a crumpled old book with a scribbled message, something about a *Half-blood Prince*. He saw Snape shoot a killing curse at Dumbledore, saw the old man fall over the parapets of the castle... Stories and images flickered through his head – and it hurt, it always hurt.

“Your story has not yet ended on my world, but it will soon – so must the *Hero Trilogy*. For what its worth, I couldn’t write worth a damn when I first put pen to page, or fingers to keyboard. Your story, the parts I didn’t *borrow*, was my first creation.” Joe laughed. “But even now I wonder if someone is writing my world, some author somewhere a creation above this one, writing this world into existence.”

“It... it is the essence of life that it exists for its own sake,” Harry whispered.

Joe tilted his head and moved back a pace in his chair. He looked unnerved. “I never thought or wrote those words, Harry – you see, that was all you. Oh, *brilliant – fantastic!* You have a life of your own, I think I may have given you that much, at least.”

“You gave me nightmares and hopeless years in hell.”

“Yes, I did. As you said, I’m a bastard. But I had big plans for you, still do,

if you accept them. There was *always* hope. You know that.”

“Why bother anymore?” Harry asked.

“Come now,” Joe said gently. “This downward spiral of misery gets even me down – imagine what the readers would think. Those are who we work for, you and I, Harry.”

“None of this is true,” Harry replied firmly, cutting his hand down through the air.

Joe shook his head. “People think that because a novel’s invented it isn’t true. Exactly the reverse is the case. Biography and memoirs can never be wholly true, since they cannot include every conceivable circumstance of what happened. The novel can do that!”

Harry stumbled into the bookcase, his vision blurred and failing. His head felt as if an axe had split it in two. “Can’t you do something about this?” he asked. “I’m dying, aren’t I? I know what that feels like....”

“This isn’t dying, Harry,” Joe said. “This is your conscience fighting non-existence. You chose Oblivion without your heart. Sometimes... we humans... we make choices with our brains when we should be using our hearts. You did that, and I-am-undoing-it. Trust me, Harry, and give meaning to your life. P-please....”

“...No....”

“I can write the words back in, you know, and that will be it. *The End*,” Joe spat. “You falling into Oblivion and none of this ever happening. Christ, Harry, is that what you really, really want? I’ve given you your heart, it beats without a bloody sword through it, so *choose*.”

Harry snarled, and lashed out at the stacks of books on the bookshelf, knocking several dozen aside. One of them was titled *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

“What is your ending, writer?” he asked bitterly. “What do you plan for me?”

Joe pounded his fist into the desk, more than once he had been

frustrated by Harry's stubborn defiance, his unrivalled anger and heated tone. "Flaming bloody happiness!" he shouted. "You'll never have a normal life, that is beyond Harry Potter, but you will have happiness if I have to jam it down your throat!"

Harry began to laugh – insanely, wildly. It was quite a thing to see in real life, Joe thought, someone laughing without regard for who was watching, laughing without any bands of sanity whatsoever clinging to their mind.

"I'm Twilight Harry, aren't I?" Harry asked, tears rolling down his cheeks. "I'm quite a character – done a lot of things, haven't I?"

"Yes, you have, but in the end this choice I'm giving you is yours to make, Twilight Harry. I can only give you the second chance...."

"Why me, writer? Why Harry Potter?"

Joe shrugged. "You are Harry Potter." What more was there to say? "And I feel as if I owe you this much, at least...."

Harry sniffed, and wiped away the tears from his eyes – tears of insanity, of uncontrollable laughter. "Send me back then, give me your chance. I'll make of it what I will...."

"Can I trust you to make the right choice?"

Harry stood, and for the last moment his vision cleared, the pain fled. The world began to fade.

"I feel as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life has been but a preparation for this hour, and this trial."

"Well said," Joe inclined his head.

"Well written," Harry replied. "Not my words, and I don't think yours...."

Joe chuckled, and that blush was back in his cheeks. "You caught me – stole that line from Churchill."

Harry nodded. "Will I remember this?"

Joe stood up and took a step closer to Harry, closing the distance. He

offered his hand to his tired character, to the hero of his stories.... "I don't know," he said honestly. "For a time, maybe, enough to make the right choice.... But I don't know what will happen. As it was before, and will be again, all bets are off. Just believe in free will, Harry."

Harry only hesitated for a moment, before shaking Joe's hand. "You're a bastard," he said a final time. "But you play fair."

"There's no challenge in the story otherwise... Go on now, Harry – tread once more familiar paths... your words, not mine."

My words, Harry thought. My words, my life... my story!

And that is the end of that.

All hope faded to black, and worlds of reality and make-belief no longer merged.

"Leave me, Ginny Weasley," he said, colder than ice. "I've never needed anyone, ever. I've fought my wars alone. What makes you think you can help me? That, after all this, I need you?"

"You do need me," Ginny whispered fiercely. "You do. Because you need someone to stop you. Look at what happens when no one is there!"

This struck Harry. Harder than any blow the Dark Lord had delivered in his time. No point in denying it, she was right. "I love you, you

know. What I feel for you has never been bad, never been angry or violent or hateful. It could only be love, and it's more powerful than I am."

"Then let us have a happy ending. Fix it, Harry, and come find me again..."

"Are you saving me, Ginny?"

"You're hopeless on your own."

Harry sighed, yet his defiance did not waver (as always) and Creation held another moment. Because he wanted it to. He was the

Darkslayer, the beating heart of Creation and the Design of existence itself. Was he really considering going back to the madness? Yes, he decided, he was. Oh God save him now, her perfect eyes were going to change everything... all of their eyes, the entire army of souls... they wanted him back.

"I can't promise this will ever be over," he said roughly. "That some monster or demon won't appear and destroy what we build together. I can't promise you a safe life with me in it."

Ginny didn't hesitate. "Being loved by you makes me feel safe."

Few words. Awesome meaning. Enough to turn the course of history...

And just like that, life returned to Harry James Potter. A will to continue, a rejuvenation of his strength and defiance. He had no idea what the future now held for him, but he wanted to see... maybe an early death, where the death was final and the peace eternal. That sounded nice, but not what he really wanted. What he really wanted was a chance at simple happiness with a girl he had fallen in love with a very long time ago...

"After this, Ginny," Harry whispered, his muscles straining now to keep existence together. "After this things may be different... I may not be able to bring you back if you die, if I die... the rules will bind me again, because that's the only way I can continue to exist... and I'll have enemies."

"It doesn't matter, so long as you're there."

Harry smiled, slow and steady... "I want you to know, that no matter what I would walk into Hell itself to keep you safe."

"You've already done that, time and time again..."

"And I always will, but shush now... I'm trying to deflect attention away from my obvious heroism." He sounded human again, and that was good.

Ginny grinned. "Go save the world then, Harry. Will I see you soon?"

"When Time exists again, you'll only be waiting heartbeats. Stay safe,

Gin.”

“You too, hero.”

Power exploded, worlds erupted.... LIGHT blinded everything.

And Harry Potter once again made the choice between what was right, and what was easy.

????

In the beginning of the Return of Twilight, every being in every universe in all of creation felt something good and pure, something that had been missing for aeons, slip back into place. Something decent, undeniably *right*, returned. Call it Twilight, call it Hope, call it *God*. Whatever it was, someone had set to right the greatest mistake ever, and all would be well. The End had been averted, cataclysm avoided, non-existence negated.

For the little girl wandering through the valley on a planet that was lost in some far away corner of an anonymous universe in the long, never-ending strands of existence, the feeling of *contentment* with the world, the scent of *good* on the air, the sound of *light* in her ears, had come not so long ago – mere days.

She was only young at eleven, and before the feeling of *return* (like most beings in creation) had not really known that something had been terribly wrong with existence, having been born and lived her entire life in that *wrongness*. Now she knew, and was wholly glad it was well. This was no conscious feeling, just something that felt warm in the heart.

A hero had set all to right, she found herself thinking in a daydream, a basket for berries tucked under her arm. All would be well.

Marie found him on the bank of the river just before sunset, in the twilight, down where the best blueberries were this time of year. They grew entwined with the thorny white rose bushes, and were always the juiciest berries in the valley come spring.

At first she thought he was a ghoul from deep in the earth, that had

swam up from the ocean several hundred miles to the east and died in the sunlight, for her father had told her of such pitiful creatures, but once her curiosity overcame her fear she drew closer to the bloody and messy thing on the riverbank, and saw in fact that it was a man... a boy. Clothed in rags and mud and dirt, blood, yet human.

Surely he was dead, and Marie was sickly curious, having only ever seen a dead man hanging from the gallows in town, and only once then from across the square. His green eyes (like emeralds, she thought) gazed lifelessly at the pebbled shore. They did not blink, nor did the boy's chest rise and fall to indicate he was drawing breath.

Having moved closer, Marie would have been more alarmed if she had in fact seen his eyes blink or if he had taken a breath. Running clean through his chest, through his heart, was a sparkling silver sword that glittered in the twilight. Gems encrusted the hilt, and streaks of blood marred the otherwise ethereal finish of the weapon.

She'd have to run and tell father, for this boy had been murdered....

Don't, a voice whispered in her mind. *Remove the sword.*

"*What...?*" she barely whispered.

Remove the sword.

The voice was sweet, soft, and yet left no room for defiance. The words seemed to shake. It was joined by another, and another...

Sword... remove... the sword... the sword... remove—

Remove the sword... save the Darkslayer... sword... salvation—

Last chance... for redemption...salvation... remove... sword...

Marie gasped and dropped her basket of berries as the full blossoms on the white rose bushes seemed to sway in the wind (yet there was no wind) and bend towards the broken figure. The flowers seemed to be trying to uproot themselves in order to reach the dead boy.

The voices in her head grew louder, more demanding – *REMOVE THE SWORD* – no longer sweet but urgent, almost *fearful*.

Marie realised tears were coursing down her cheeks, but they were *pure*. She herself was terrified, but sure. This all felt right, everything felt as it should, so she took a step nearer to the body on the bank, and then another. All was well, this was supposed to be. Forces beyond her control were telling her that this was all right. No forces she could hear... beyond the voices that she knew were the roses... but their message was clear nonetheless.

This was right.

Still, her nerve almost failed her.

She leaned over the boy, looked down at his messy and matted dark hair, at those lifeless eyes in his lolling head. She saw a deep gash on his forehead, a ragged cut in the shape of a crude lightning bolt.

He must live! she (the roses) thought.

Her hand closed over the hilt of the sword, and it was cold – freezing – she winced at the touch, and dreaded what she had to do next. Already, with

just her small fingers around the handle of the blade, she could feel the awful *resistance* of the weapon embedded inside of the boy. It was *in him*.

She'd need both hands and all her strength to pull it out.

This is him, she thought, and pulled the sword up. White-hot light ran like blood from the wound. *He set all to right*. A glimpse of the history of this sword ran through her mind, all the years and all the wars, the evil it had destroyed – the Evil – and this knowing almost destroyed her mind. But humans are strong, resilient, and Marie was young yet.

For a few brief minutes, this small girl (on an unknown world we shall only visit once more) had become part of the forces that surrounded and defied the threat of non-existence.

She pulled the sword out of the boy, it was almost as tall as she was – but light – and let it fall to the ground crusted in dry blood, glad to be rid of its tainted touch, its inconceivable history.

A good strong breeze pulled dozens of petals from the myriad of white roses and they swirled around Marie and the boy (*singing!* A thousand, thousand voices of the dead and of the lost). She was suddenly afraid, for she knew the boy would live. He would awaken here, with her, and then what would she do?

Life returned to his eyes and the spinning vortex of petals began to slow and fall to the earth. The light running from the wound through his heart stopped, having healed the damage. She heard his first shaky, rattling breath and felt her legs give way beneath her. The ground was warm, and although gripped by vicious fear, Marie felt safe this close to the boy.

His eyes were alive but unfocused, his head turned now towards the falling petals and the azure twilight beyond that. Marie was sure he didn't see her.

Almost below hearing, he was saying something, whispering under his breath. She leaned in closer.

"...*not over...*" he said. "*Not over yet... could all fail again... Ways of Twi...*"

Harry Potter gasped as life fully returned, and as always it was *pain*. He screamed and his entire body convulsed, his back arching and his feet kicking up a spray of cool river water.

He had died, and it had been *final*. Christ, he *remembered* all that had happened in the Last Battle for Creation.

Ethan?

Not a whisper...

ETHAN!?

He was alone.

It had all ended, *everything*, but it wasn't over. Not for him. In the end, he had to go on alone...

God, it had been so long – over a century of battle – and yet it now seemed like the blink of an eye.

The End.

What needed to be done?

By the sheer force of his will he had held Creation together against the encroaching Oblivion. It had cost him his life. Yet he now lived again, for what purpose?

Redemption... salvation...

Because he was The Boy Who Lived.

He recalled what had happened to Ethan – he had killed him after they separated, thrust him back into Creation.

And then he recalled the writer, and choosing the *right* choice to exist.

Well, where was the happy ending he had been promised?

This ending was painful.

Not the ending then is it, he told himself. Must be close though...

Harry sat up. There were great things afoot, and as always he was at the heart of the madness. He began to chuckle, and then to truly laugh.

The smell of wildflowers, of wild white roses, filled the world and tears fell from his emerald eyes.

Ways of Twilight here I come, he thought.

Not quite The End

Chapter 33 – The Beginning

Or perhaps, the Reality in Fiction

An ending of horror, a most dire ending. And yet,

I can't help feeling a liberating ending,
in spite of everything.

~~Thomas Mann

Life to be understood turns into legend....

And legend, be it big or small, is always *defiant*.

There's not much more to be said in this tale, nothing much more to be done. All has been said and done, you might say, to simplify things. The villain has been defeated. We could end it right there, really, with that. Yet there are a few unanswered questions, one or two loose ends...

Which kind of means everything *isn't really* all said and done. Hmm... strike that last!

We've had some adventures, we've been to the farthest corners of creation, and fought the terribly things that breed in the darkness of the dead space between universes... we've walked a million worlds, laughed and cried with a millions souls.

And we've danced with the devil – we've held hands with eternity. We shook the hand that shook the world, and rode on the winds of time and left the vortex of destiny lying in the dust.

Quite a lot we've seen and done, looking back now over the years. We've walked alongside the greatest hero in existence, the last truly defiant man. A boy, actually, depending on how you accept the relativity of time.

Harry James Potter.

A name that has echoed down the halls of eternity, a name that has broken through the bonds of fate and time.

The name of the hero, wielding a sword of honest justice and struggling with the inhuman will that the circumstances of his life had fused into his very soul.

Sword – Defiance – Soul

None of these laws possible without *imagination*.

We've almost seen and done everything now, as you know, yet what remains to be done will count for all.

Rain hammering against the windows, all is never silent in the world of the writers, in the transformation of myth falling through the shattering of a thousand lost mirrors of desire.

And after all these years, what counts for all will matter less than the journey, and all that has been learnt by the Boy Who Lived.

We join him now, awake and aware once more – having made the *right* choice after making the wrong one. Having made a second choice, having taken the road less travelled, and the words unspoken. We join the hero of this tale for one last journey, his greatest and yet his shortest.

The rain stops yet the wind still howls through the dead of night, all is never silent. Remember that, in the heart of eternity... ALL IS NEVER SILENT!

"All is never silent..." Harry Potter whispered, catching the thought of a memory. *Not my words*, he whispered. *What did that mean?*

He rested on the bank of the river where he had returned to life a short time ago. Gently caressing the wound over his heart, the sealed yet still tender flesh from where the sword had been removed by the young girl – a hero in her own right. She had fled some time ago, to God knows where, because this wasn't Earth.

Harry could feel it in his ever-beating heart. This was not his home world, not even close, really, comparatively speaking. Was there any particular reason he had returned into his Creation at this very spot? Harry thought there must be, for him to be here there had to be a reason.

Wild roses, white, blossomed all around, filling the world with their pure scent. It had been a long while since Harry had just sat and watched the roses. They were bending in the wind – *no, against the wind* – toward where he sat with his legs dangling in the water of the river.

He was strangely at peace, content with his lot in life at the moment.

There was such a feeling of freedom running through his veins, of a job well done and the end to over a century of conflict that had culminated in the entire shell of Creation being unravelled. Only it hadn't been, and it existed now because Harry had sealed the shell together again with himself and Voldemort on the outside.

The destruction had never happened... yet it had, because he was here – he was back in existence, no longer of the void, and every breath he took was in defiance of the current state of peace Creation seemed to be in. Yet it was peace, of a kind.

The Mark on Harry's left arm, the White Rose Mark that named him the Heir to Creation, bestowed by Death himself, seemed to be humming softly... like phoenix song, he thought, but much greater – more eternal.

"What's going to happen next, I wonder?" he said aloud, speaking to the universe. A part of him, not a small part, expected an answer. He was still quite mad, yet sane enough inside that madness to realise it. Madmen who knew they were mad did not care anyway, for they are quite mad.

Dangerous as ever, Harry Potter threw back his head and laughed at the twilight sky. Everything had been set to right, he had done it. All was as it should have been since the dawn of time. There were no Destroyers, no Demons or madmen with enough power to wipe away existence – save himself – and he felt great.

At peace with the wars, at peace with the lightness that Creation now held. *Everything had been set to right, after so long.*

So why did he feel as if everything was still balanced upon the edge of a knife? That something was coming, that something was coming to destroy the peace he had created.

(Because something always was? Was that the unchangeable way of things?)

Harry could *feel* it, like an itch in the back of his mind – a taste on the tip of his tongue. Words of power rushing through his head and out of his

mouth....

“All is never silent in the world of the writers....” he whispered. “All is never silent.”

He’d already broken his promise to Ginny, to return to her within heartbeats of existing again – he could do it, just simply open a door to home... yet he was compelled to wait, by his own will. And *nothing*, not even the worst Hell had to offer, had ever broken Harry’s will. He himself was slave to it.

The Reader! You dogged, uninsultable, print-orientated bastard, it’s you I’m addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction.

WHO ELSE?

You’ve read me this far then? Even this far?

How is it you don’t go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off?

Where’s your shame?

Harry pressed a hand to his forehead. A blazing band of pain rippled through his mind. Only not from his scar, that infamous jagged lightning bolt. No, this was something else – this was the heartbeat of Creation pulsing through his head, demanding he stand and fight for his existence.

Harry stood, BUT HE HAD NEVER FOR A MOMENT **SAT DOWN!**

The trickling waters in the river surged up and over his boots, soaking his pants up to his knees. Strapped to his back was, of course, the sword of Godric Gryffindor – rather his sword, the sword of Harry Potter. He had earned it by now, you would think.

A long black cloak hung over the sword so that only the hilt was visible just above his left shoulder.

A thin ray of sunlight shot through the twin peaks of the mountains in the distance, highlighting Harry like the performer on centre stage. Twilight was about to fade from the world, giving way to millions of unfamiliar stars – yet they were familiar, Harry knew each one intimately. He was joined to them and they to him – he was the Darkslayer, and he had done just that – now he was the Guardian.

Petals of the roses broke away from their buds and swirled on the warm air, landing in Harry's hair, on his shoulders, and falling like snow into the flow of the river.

Something magical was happening.

"Truth in fiction," Harry whispered.

He wasn't quite ready to move on yet. Something told him to wait.

Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people who never knew each other. Citizens of distant epochs. Books break the shackles of time, allowing us to voyage through time.

The one who tells the stories rules the world.

Walking on the surface of the water now, the rose petals swirling up a storm around him – yet peacefully, gracefully, and without a sound – Harry realised all at once what this stream was... or rather, what it *could* be.

"From a distance it looks like peace..." he murmured, tilting his head ever so slightly to the side and smiling. "Flames to dust..."

The Ways of Twilight had never been some lost and inaccessible command centre of the Fallen Creator... no, they were *here*, right *here*. They were everywhere along the flow of time, always there just out of sight. Realising that, Harry began to laugh again – you didn't even need

magic, or power, to access the Ways.

It was all imagination – so long as you knew how to use it.

It had taken him over a century to work that out. Yet he was unique in the way that he was the only person to have ever done so.

He felt vindicated, after so very long.

There are moments in your life that make you, that set the course of who you're going to be. Sometimes they're little, subtle moments.

Sometimes... they are not.

Even if you see them coming you are never ready for the big moments.

So what are we? Helpless? Puppets?

No.

Nobody asks for their life to change, not really. But it does. The big moments will come, can't help that. It's what you do afterwards that counts, that's when you find out who you are.

Who you will be.

Fate

Emotion

Power

Sacrifice

Balance

Hope

Forgiveness

Knowledge

Stars

Life

Harry sighed as the ages rushed through him a final time, as all power of the Ways of Twilight – power he had once held, once upon a time... – flowed from its true source and down through every possible pathway in existence, he basked in the radiance of the end of Time and Destiny.

Do you remember, Harry, those infinite Ways? You stood before eternity, and found the Door to everything hidden behind your own name?

What madness inspired that?

What Design of True Purpose decreed your name as the bolt that holds Creation together?

The power of time and space... the heir to the God Throne... yet none of it mattered, none of it at all.

The rose tattoo circling Harry's arm burned with his thoughts, and the thorns – although only appearing to be ink – pierced his skin. Blood, crimson and strong, began to flow. Harry could not recall a world he had not spilt his own blood upon...

"Time to be getting on with the end, Harry," he whispered to himself.
"Long past time."

A thousand memories rushed through his mind, overwhelmed his feelings and emotions and dulled the pain to nothing... numb was better, some times, most times... if you were a hero.

THE WAYS....

Harry gasped as suddenly he was submerged deep beneath the water. He knew what had happened, and that this was not the shallow river he had been standing upon a heartbeat ago. Reality had... *slipped*, as it does, and he was no longer standing on a world of creation, but floating in the Stream of all time and illusion, in the dark space between universes. He was in the support network that fed power and life to all and every universe that did or *could* exist.

Years fell into seconds and seconds into years, day was night... floating in everything made of nothing, Harry's only constant was twilight – he swam toward the twilight. Only he did not need to swim, not here, it only felt like swimming because of the time it took to get there. Only a single second, only all the eternities of time and life.

As an old man one hundred and sixteen years old he had first found the Ways of Twilight. Now he was seventeen again, in body at least, and more so in his mind as his younger self – fresher, stronger – fought for dominance against the old memories and scars... a fight Twilight Harry would let himself win, in the end. Better to be young, than live with his responsibility.

The Stream faded and before Harry's feet a crystal road made of stars appeared, and a warm breeze travelled distant leagues through the darkness of memory to brush his unruly hair about his head, and make him smile in sweet remembrance that peace, true peace, was in his grasp.

Light had won out over the balance of opposites, yet it had to hold for ever. Harry intended to see that it did, at the Ways of Twilight.

He began a long walk along a road of stars.

A walk he had begun so very long ago, a walk he had finished once, only to find he hadn't even really begun... a bittersweet defeat for the Darkslayer, a chance of redemption for the boy who had been, and would be again, Harry James Potter.

As if God himself were painting on a giant canvas reality began to impose itself on the blackness of the void around Harry. His road hardened, turned into dusty limestone, and a wash of twilit sky stretched

across the heavens, defining the world. Rolling hills and sun swept meadows covered in white roses were etched ever so carefully, flawlessly, on to the canvas of creation.

After a time that could have been days or years, it didn't matter anymore, the roses on either side of the road began to thin, and then finally disappear altogether. Harry looked back at one point, just after the last rose fell from sight and could not see a single petal anywhere. It was as if they had never been....

~~Defiance of the Hero, Chapter 29 – The Last Hero

"I know this dance..." Harry whispered. "Some of our hardest challenges never seem to end."

The road went on though, as roads usually do, and Harry topped a rise some hours later to find himself face to face with a phantom from his past. Allarius stood at the top of the hill, silent and unmoving. His eyes of fire burned strongly and his charred flesh let off thin tendrils of smoke. In his hand was the lone curved black sword that he had stabbed Harry with one hundred years ago.

Harry did not even spare him a second glance, and walked through the memory without blinking. Allarius was just the first of many, many memories though.

Vampires and Death Eaters, all of his enemies. Dark humans, demons and creatures that shouldn't exist lined either side of the road for miles ahead. Every one of Harry's conquered enemies stood silently by the road, staring without thought at the man who had destroyed them.

Harry moved on, the only sound his footfalls, and gave up counting his foes at seven thousand – most of them vampires and creatures similar. Hours he walked with the eyes of the dead upon him and not once did they move or did he reach out to touch one. They were memories, that was all, eyes to follow him as he completed his century old quest.

The lines of the dead stretched on beyond sight, and after a while Harry found himself walking with his eyes cast to the ground, unable or perhaps not wanting to look at his body count. He felt no remorse though,

unless it was over what he had had to do. They all came looking for a fight, never once did he take it to them.

At long last, and after many hours, the last thousand or so phantom memories faded away, and it was only then that Harry realised he had not seen the one enemy that should count. Tom Marvolo Riddle – Lord Voldemort.

His Voldemort, the one from his own world. The man who was more snake than human, with blood red eyes and pale skin, slits for nostrils and an air of evil surrounding him. Every other conceivable enemy in existence had been there, staring accusingly from the side of the road... but not Lord Voldemort.

~~Defiance of the Hero, Chapter 29 – The Last Hero

Harry had defeated him. He had scattered Lord Voldemort's very essence and soul into Oblivion, from which he himself had suffered and ceased to exist, only to break that final rule and reclaim life because – All is never silent – and the one who tells the story rules the world.

Everything has an opposite, and Dark was frequently balanced by Light.

It was Ron first, and why shouldn't it be? Ron had been his first friend. Ronald Weasley, sixteen year old Ron Weasley stood smiling by the side of the road, in place of where his enemies had stood before. Seeing him there actually made Harry pause, but he moved on without a word.

Hermione followed, Hermione Granger. She smiled at him also, dressed as she was in her Hogwarts uniform. Perhaps that was what she had died in? Harry moved on, giving her only a glance. Then it got harder.

Ginny was next, and Harry stopped when he came to her. She was standing there without a care and smiling at him, holding her hand forward for him to take it. Her deep brown eyes were filled with such love that it actually made Harry smile. He reached forward, intending to take her hand, but was not surprised when his own slipped through it.

She was a phantom, a memory, they all were.

Friends he had known over his long life stood beside the road smiling

now. Dumbledore and the Weasleys, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, James and Lily Potter, even Michael and Melissa, his brother and sister from another world, were there. His friends in Gryffindor and at Hogwarts as a whole made an appearance. Then their numbers started to thin, and those he knew as friends was a much shorter walk than those he knew as enemies.

~~Defiance of the Hero, Chapter 29 – The Last Hero

It had been a long walk the first time, it was just as long the second. Yet no measure of time touched Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived. He felt, and this was true, that he had walked this path before, and knew where it ended. No place important to most, to those bound to the wheel of fate...

“Fate is an excuse for the weak...” Harry whispered.

*It is destiny, phase of the weak human heart.
It is destiny, dark apology for every error.
The strong and virtuous admit not destiny.*

Wherever he was and whenever he was, Harry felt as though he was approaching the end. Everything rested on the blade of a razor, and his final choices here would decide it all. Eventually, and without much preamble, Harry Potter came upon a door in the middle of the road.

It was a simple door, made of wood and possessing an iron handle fashioned in the image of a lion. It stood in the ground on hinges that were latched to the air and it was completely bare.

~~Defiance of the Hero, Chapter 29 – The Last Hero

Every muscle in Harry's body was tensed and his hand itched to reach for his sword. If an attack was coming, it would come now, just before victory was sure. Yet what was there left to throw at him, who was left to stand against him? All his enemies had long since been defeated. Allarius was

Voldemort and Voldemort was Allarius. Both done and dusted...

After all this time, it came down to opening a single door....

Harry reached for the handle, and gently pushed the door open on its hinges....

No, that wasn't right. Just as it had not been right the first time.

Harry did not push the door – the door pushed creation around itself, it swung the whole shell of time and space, of not-time and not-space, around its

hinges and Harry and the door remained motionless, caught in the eye of the storm. Facing another twist in reality, however, the door now appeared open...

And Harry was standing on a familiar glowing pedestal in a room that was showered with starlight. The Stream, that inexorable flow and pull of time, lapped at the base of his pedestal. He dared not look down just yet, a look could drive one mad, but knew he would have to soon. Being submerged in the Stream was one thing, easier to handle, looking back *into* the Stream from a vantage point outside of Time... well, that was another thing altogether.

The pedestal began to move, spurred by Harry's thoughts. He floated through the starlight above Time toward an archaic stone staircase that was older than Creation itself. Not much older, but before the universes, at least. How could one measure the age of something that existed above Time?

Just before he reached the staircase Harry looked down into the dark water he moved through and that one look was... worth nothing. He saw into time, saw it stretching back beyond imagination and how it effected and changed everything. He saw eternity wrapped in destiny and fate, fused with purpose and infinity, and he saw himself echoing down through the ages, from Time's beginning to Time's end.

Harry Potter, The Last Hero.

It did not drive him mad – *he had lived through it all, after all* – as he had

thought it might – *not precisely* lived – He was as mad as could be regardless. But it was the right kind of mad, always had been. He ascended the stairs at the end of the journey.

At the top of the stairs everything changed again, and he found himself standing in a room similar to the one that led to the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry. A circular stone room with ten doors aligned around him. All polished nicely and standing like sentinels, hiding the truth about life and everything.

Truth in Fiction.

Harry knew exactly what needed to be done.

The Ten Doors:

Fate

Emotion

Power

Sacrifice

Balance

Hope

Forgiveness

Knowledge

Stars

Life

He closed his eyes, standing in the heart of Creation – *he was the heart of Creation* – and concentrated pure thought on what he needed. There were no tricks or magic involved, just simple human thought and imagination.

Perhaps imagination was a kind of magic... the only kind.

In the centre of the circular room an age old door appeared, a door seeped in blood and the wars and ashes of time and all its many incarnations of evil, and the ravages of Oblivion. Harry's eyes fell upon it and his soul was riven, torn asunder, at the sight.

P.ttr

It was his door, the door that led to the end. And it was entirely alien from the old oak frame he had seen on his last visit here. His name was corroded, almost worn away to nothing.

Harry approached the door with all the fury of the Darkslayer burning in his eyes. As he had done before, he hurled his fist into the crimson frame and it splintered, shattered into a millions pieces – but not before it transported him to the next level of Twilight, the very stairs that led to...

"The Godhand," he said, feeling nothing but the need to end the inevitable and maintain the fragile peace Oblivion had wrought.

It was the staircase, and the previous time he had walked it the stairs had been shining and golden, made of twilight and stars. Now they were dead, or as close to it as twilight could be. Thick tendrils of black oil swayed like seaweed just under the transparent steps. The steps were dull, like old bronze, and not at all forever.

Harry didn't like this.

He knew evil when he saw it, knew it by scent, and sight, and smell, and taste. He could even hear it, eating away at Twilight, at a Twilight that cried out for mercy in its death throes. Harry began to climb the stairs, and for a long moment that feeling of time not existing, not ever and not again, held him and aeons passed for seconds...

Bathed in light, Harry climbed the final few steps and stood upon a great cliff miles above a world that swirled and changed with a rainbow of colours, as if an artist painting it was doing so in layers. Harry thought, and instantly he knew his thought was correct, that he was seeing a world being born – one made from a choice of another world. It was incredible, a sight to remember.

~~*Defiance of the Hero, Chapter 30 – There Are Still No Happy Endings*

Seeped in darkness, Harry climbed the final few steps and stood upon a great cliff miles above a wor—Nothing. There were no new worlds being created, only a sea of seething and roaring purple fire and vicious lightnings tearing into the spray of undulating flame...

He turned away, sickened and disheartened. Was it all for nothing? Was Creation damned again already? Without new worlds and universes, all would fall stagnant. Creating new worlds, imagining great stories, was how existence *breathed*. Something was blocking its airways...

Then there were the doors. Two of them, standing in the air again, hinged to nothing but reality... which was a malleable thing here.

The gold plaques on the doors read what Harry had expected, and he felt a moment's relief that this at least was going as planned.

One door said ***Time***.

The other read ***Destiny***.

Harry stepped over the filthy ground and ran his hands along the solid oak doors. His fingers brushed the tarnished golden plaque that ***Time*** was inscribed upon and he flinched back, expecting to be plunged into the Stream as had happened last time. But that didn't happen. The plaque fell away, revealing a new word on a plaque of the darkest cold steel, a word written in letters of fire.

Game, it said.

Harry roared and swept his hand across the plaque on the ***Destiny*** door, already knowing what it would read...

Fiery letters glared at him defiantly. ***Over***, was written in place of ***Destiny***.

"Game over," Harry said, and the Ways should have turned to ice at the coldness in his tone. "Only one bastard with sense of humour so lacking to pull a stunt like this...."

Harry calmly, oh so calmly, reached over his shoulder and pulled his

sword slowly but surely out of its sheath. He licked his lips, moved away from the doors and looked down over the massive cliff at the ocean of purple flame once again...

“SHOW YOURSELF, ALLARIUS!”

He's like fire and ice, and rage. He's like the night, and the storm in the heart of the sun. He's ancient and forever. He burns at the centre of time and he can see the turn of the universe.

And he's... wonderful.

Nothing can be eternal.

The thing about real life is, it normally costs you.

*I've held a torch against the darkness...
only to have its light stolen from me.*

Let the heavens fall now, I'm ready.

Meaningless words flowed through Harry's head so fast and so sure that he almost wept. He couldn't support himself against the weight of those words and he fell to his knees, a grimace of pain marring his young and careworn face.

It's okay to die... do you believe that?

No.

What was happening? Why was the heart of Creation, why were the Ways of Twilight, dying?

It could only be the demon – somehow the demon... always and forever the demon.

'There's no one coming, Harry.'

And that voice sounded like Ethan Rafe – at times the voice of reason, and at other times the voice of insanity. One and the same in Harry's head, most of the time. Time... *bandits*. Yet Ethan no longer existed as part of Harry's soul. That was all said and done.

Wasn't it?

Was anyone still left to fight?

"There is no one coming, Harry." He needed to say that aloud. "It's just me alone now...." Harry found that thought entirely alien, and completely humbling. There was no one left to fight, no one was coming... "I win, fancy that."

He wanted to slap himself for feeling mildly disappointed about this... No one left to fight, it was almost an insult.

Oh well, he thought, but what does that mean for all of this mess?

Game Over.

Harry thought long and hard, trying to figure it out, trying to understand why this ocean of fire existed, why the doors to time and destiny were a joke, and came to the quite solid conclusion...

That he did not care, not in the least.

He was going home. He *needed* to go home, and try and slip back into a life of mortality and meaning. To Ginny, to Ron, to Hermione... to

Hogwarts. Back to a hidden world, small and unseen, yet teeming with *life*. Out on the plains of non-creation, within the Ways of Twilight, life wasn't wanted or needed. It was a cold and lonely place, and Harry wanted well shot of it.

It was awful, actually, dealing with the power of existence. After a hundred years and a million battles, all Harry had to show for it was a life

devoid of meaning and purpose. He was left feeling... incomplete, without a fight to be fought. Crazy, definitely, but eggs were eggs no matter what way you looked at them.

Having stood up, Harry returned to the doors and rested his hand on the handle that had been the **Destiny** door. All at once he gasped as his five senses failed... for one heartbeat... two, he could not see nor hear nor touch... smell and taste of eternity all swept away under the weight of—

He snapped out of it to find his bare arm, more specifically the white rose tattoo, shining with undying – unyielding – radiance....

He *wrenched* the door open and it felt like tearing away the foundations of creation once again. The Rose Mark screamed, and Harry felt a million universes spiral away into the void as the door screeched on its invisible hinges and opened out upon the last, final truth of this tired existence....

A voice was laughing deep inside of his head... Harry could not see or feel the smile on his face. He could have just gone home... but no, he had to know what lay beyond this final door... After all, when would he ever be back here?

*Almost against his will – almost – Harry floated over to the door on the right, the **Destiny** door, and ran his hands along the smooth wood, careful not to touch the word that would open the door and reveal to him, without a doubt, the destiny of everything.... the purpose of Existence.*

For a long time in this life Harry had thought himself fearless, that he had seen and done enough to be completely unafraid of the unknown – of war and pain... and yet, here he was shaking uncontrollably before the ultimate Truth. He fell to his knees, fear coursing through his veins and wept.

*He also felt a presence beyond this door.... beyond **the** door... and knew that should he open it, he would go mad. Completely and without mercy his mind would destroy itself. Ethan had been silent for many weeks but Harry could still feel him in there, despite his best efforts to get him to talk,*

the teenager seemed unwilling. There was something wrong.

The door, now that he got a closer look at it, wasn't as smooth and as pure as he had first thought. It was cracked in parts, hairline cracks that were almost invisible. It also seemed, around the edges, that a poison was eating away the wood. It was spotted and flecked with wood rot. Something was destroying the door, and Harry instinctively knew that it was Evil, his Evil in the scar link and that which had spawned Allarius.

Through this door lay hope, salvation, truth and the force that had created the universe. To find it behind a door that held his own name worried Harry, why should he lead the way to the Truth? But it also led the way home. For now he could not worry about the poison eating its way through the door, that was for another time, he knew, when he returned to this place.

~~Defiance of the Hero, Chapter 30 – There Are Still No Happy Endings

H..a.ry Ptt..r d t.h.e So...ul of he He o

Shaptor 33333333 – Da Begin

Or per'aps, da joker in da pak

Harry... Potter... opened... Pandora's Box...

*Beyo..nd the do..or o..f **Destiny** rea..lity crumbled...*

*All. **Existence.** Denied.*

The...

End...

Thanks for stopping by, Harry, but you were always too late.

Hugs & Kisses from,

Your pal Allarius

"Don't fight him, Harry, you can't win.

)*&)^\$&)!%)“It’s not about power, **never was**, you were too blind to see that.”)@@*@#\$\$

“Forgive me, Lord Darkslayer, but some doors were not made to be opened... they are closed to keep nightmare innocent.”

SYSTEMS-ERROR PLEASE CONTACT YOUR HOST PROGRAM ADMINISTRATOR OR, IF OPERATING FROM THE BRINK OF INSANITY, DIAL 1300-YOU-FUCKED-UP-BIG-TIME-POTTER, AND THE NEXT

AVAILABLE HEIR TO CREATION WILL ANSWER YOUR CALL SHORTLY. BEEP!>

Harry raged against the wave of non-existence pouring through the open door of destiny. His mind tore itself to the far corners of creation, as thought and sensation from all across the plains of reality flooded his senses and nothing made sense. All his fuses were blown, and the door was opening upon...

THANK YOU FOR HOLDING, YOU HAVE PROGRESSED IN OUR QUEUE. WE UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR CALL, AND ONE OF OUR FRIENDLY STAFF WILL BE AVAILABLE SHORTLY, BECAUSE AT THE END OF TIME, WE’RE HERE TO HELP. BEEP!>

“Wow, this is messed up... even for you, Harry Potter.”

<YOUR. CALL. IS. NUMBER. 1. IN. LINE. To speak to an operator about any technical difficulties you may be experiencing, please hang up the phone now and pray for your death to be swift and painless. Beep!>

LOLROFLMAO, Harry.

jbvkhfuuuuuyvblkgghppg

drgeger

erwqqqqqwettewwwwww

piobgnmw[qgufqs

zxsxzxvxv;'[]kpp;

xghfmjkukgfhjghj

THIS IS THE END, I PROMISE

you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight

r

This program is proudly brought to you by the good people of TwilightCorp™. All rights to the apocalypse reserved.

C:\WHITEROSE\Allarius_Voldemort_reboot.exe

C:\WHITEROSE>Delete_Darkslayer.exe

C:\WHITEROSE\Abandon_All_Hope.exe

Execute command...?

It's weird... you know the end of something great is coming, but you want to hold on, just for one more second... just so it can hurt a little more.

If you want a happy ending that depends, of course, on where you stop the story.

Eschatology, kids, is a word you may not have heard.

Basically, it concerns itself with the branches of theology and philosophy that delve into the chaos and madness associated with the *end of the world*, with the *ultimate destiny of humanity*.

You know, that deep bullshit.

Ha, oh yes, we're going to dance this dance one last time... didn't think you could get away without at least one final waltz along the borders of forever, did you?

Eternity is a mere moment, just long enough for a joke.

Harry: *'My head hurts, writer, why is all never silent in your world?'*

Dumbledore: *'Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!'*

Dumbledore knew why:

"Harry, I owe you an explanation," said Dumbledore. "An explanation of an old man's mistakes. For I see now that what I have done, and not done, with regard to you, bears all the hallmarks of the failings of age. Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels. But old men are

guilty if they forget what it was to be young...and I seem to have forgotten lately."

Also:

"Time is making fools of us again."

Purpose is what makes our lives worth living. Purpose gives us the feeling and enforces the belief that what we do with the few short years given to us *matters*, that our place in the world is *marked* by our passage and that, as we die, someone somewhere somehow will remember that we were here...

Who will be left to remember the end of the world?

Not with a bang, but a whimper – not with a shout, but a sigh – do not go silently into that good night: rage, *rage* against the dying of the light.

'Are you as tired as I am?'

'Yes, Harry, for what it's worth... I've never been more tired in my life.'

'Funny that, I feel it through my very soul, and my heart tells me sleep

(peace) will always be a long way off.'

'Ha, so wise you've become. The heart is a strange thing, Harry. It's also a significant weakness.'

'I disagree.'

'You would.'

We're falling through the pages of chaos, lost in the senseless madness of a happy ending.

Pandora's Box?

Such a thing was never a true temptation, there would have been legions willing to pry off the lid and unleash all hell upon creation.

Why do this, you ask?

Just for the hell of it.

Was there a God, behind the door of ***Destiny***, or just a corrupt Throne that could throw all of Creation into endless chaos, that could undo and backspace all the moments that matter in our lives and leave existence a shattered and hollowed out shell that, whilst it would still exist within Oblivion, would not be worth inhabiting?

Surely not.

Surely the final truth of fighting to exist was something a lot more... *meaningful.*

If the Creator has fallen, Harry thought – a stray thought, almost unheard, as he raged against the whirlwind of corruption flowing out of the open door of ***Destiny***. He was blinded to all, anchored only by his defiance. *If the Creator has fallen*, he thought, shouted with his mind, *then show me a corpse...*

His thoughts became words that echoed across the Ways of Twilight, demanding of the corruption a reason and purpose for it to exist...

“THERE IS MORE THAN AN END OF CORRUPTION! ENTROPY CANNOT BE INEVITABLE!”

A voice replied, skimming the crest of the waves of destiny and the storm of time, riding the lightning and burning in the fires of eternity, a voice that came from everywhere and nowhere, a voice that refused to exist and existed in nothing but an ill-used reality...

‘I recognise you for what you are, Harry Potter. The last of your kind – maybe even a hero.’

Harry paused, shuddered, and his thoughts jumped on the voice with all the justice left in the universe. “And who are you in this story?”

‘Just a dried up old corpse with nothing better to do than talk to you.’

“Oh?” Harry needed a break from the madness. His mind hurt so very much.

‘Go home, Harry, you found a meaning and purpose there long before you ever began to dabble in the laws of Creation. Here, here you have found nothing but broken truths beyond all understanding...’

“My purpose?”

‘Chocolate brown eyes, fiery red hair, curves in all the right places...’

Harry let a single tear fall down his cheek. It followed the curve of one forgotten scar, a scar gained somewhere and *somewhen*. He’d promised himself no more tears so very long ago. He had not even wept on the brink of Oblivion. “Ginny...”

‘Aye, lad, always comes back to love for you no matter what role the writer gives you. It’s your greatest strength.’

“How much longer will this drag on for? I gave up caring a long time ago.”

*‘You’ve opened **Destiny** when you should have just walked away, Harry. Destiny is there to be fulfilled. That’s what you have to do now.’*

Here the voice paused, and Harry sensed uncertainty, perhaps even fear. *‘And I’m sorry, so very sorry; it is going to hurt so much.’*

"Pain I understand."

'Do you understand death?'

"Death is when the monsters get you."

'So very true... your imagination is remarkable.'

Harry braced himself, he thought the world was fading back into place, but darkness was impossible to pierce without light. "How do I fulfil this destiny of yours?"

'Take my hand.'

At that Harry sighed. "No."

'Why not?'

"I work alone. I don't need faith... not in you."

'Again, I must ask, why not?'

Harry shook his head. A bead of blood flowed from his eye down the same track that his single tear had fallen. "You abandoned Creation to so much pain, to so much suffering."

'Ah, you think you know me!' The voice sounded amused. 'You can't have meaning without pain. There can not be purpose without suffering.'

"That's so cruel... unfair."

'That's life. Do with it what you will.'

Harry began to laugh; it was a desperate, bitter sound, echoing off the unseen walls of Twilight's End.

'That's all I really am, you know, Harry.' The voice was soft now, ever so soft. It was almost pitying. 'An echo of a memory of an idea...'

"You're nothing but a thought."

'And yet I was there at the true beginning, I'll be there after the true end, when all the lights of Oblivion burn out and the void itself is consumed into nothing... And I'll be there when it starts all over again.'

Harry shook his head. "That's madness... where's the purpose in that?"

'There is no purpose in eternity, Harry – come now, you're smarter than this. Purpose comes from mortality, from being just human.'

And Harry saw the truth in that, however bittersweet and, at times, *small*, it may seem. Heaven above and Hell below, he saw the truth in living again.

But to what end?

"Why me? Why a Darkslayer at all, when you exist?"

'You are Harry Potter, Champion of the Light.'

"But *why!*?"

'Because I don't exist, Harry, I have no existence at all.'

"Then am I just talking to myself here? Is this real? Or is all of this happening just inside my head?"

The voice brimmed with energy. *'Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?'*

Harry sensed amusement. *'Dumbledore told you that, once upon a time...'*

"I'd remember if he had," Harry replied.

'No, no, my dear boy, you wouldn't.'

A long silence stretched through the timeless expanse of Twilight. Worlds and universes, white and black roses, all or nothing... time for the final act.

All that held back ultimate corruption, the end of the Darkslayer, and the return of the embodiment of pure evil, was Harry's will power. He had a reason to hold on...

"So where do we go from here?"

'I go nowhere, I stay everywhere, and the great wheels of time click over

another notch. But for you, Harry, you have a chance no other has ever had in any Creation...

"Sounds... magical." Defiantly sarcastic to the end...

'Yes, it comes full circle to magic, to your power. You have strength enough within you to scour existence, this existence, from Oblivion. You have strength enough to travel the void of Oblivion, encased in your strength, and unmake all the universes that ever were, that ever could be... power enough to challenge the Creator...' The voice chuckled. 'You could be there at the True Beginning, you could exist forever, live infinite lives and enjoy infinite pleasures across all of time and creation, and witness the True End... and continue to do it all over again.'

The voice grew sombre, serious. *'You could be eternity, Harry Potter.'*

"And if that doesn't sound appealing enough?" Harry replied.

'Then you can return to mortality, to the human race. It would not be hard. Perhaps if you walk through this door, you'd find an empty pool...' Although the voice sounded calm, Harry could feel the fear, the anticipation. If he could have seen the voice, physically seen it, it would have shaking, unable to stand. 'And if you were to sacrifice your tremendous strength, fill the pool...and cleanse the heart of creation... Well, what then, aye?'

"I win."

'Checkmate, Harry Potter, against the darkness of Oblivion and the anti-life that breached this Creation when you threw Lord Voldemort out.'

"If I give up my power, what will I become?"

'Human again, mortal and unable to resist the laws of life and death anymore. You would have one life, one chance, and then you would die and your soul will enter the afterlife – perhaps forever, perhaps to be reborn... in this age or the next.'

After over a century of war, it was a choice that took only a heartbeat for our boy Harry.

He stood up, and reality crashed back in so hard and so fast that it nearly forced him back to his knees. The door of **Destiny** came back into focus and the storm-strewn sky of Twilight above the seething purple ocean of terrible flame – *who knew what monstrosities swam beneath the crimson-*

tinged waves – stank and roared with defiance enough to challenge Harry.

He recognised that ocean for what it was – the breeding ground for the next generation of evil. And it could be stopped now... before it really got off the ground.

Beyond the door there was only darkness. It had swung open outwards revealing a rectangle of the sharpest night. The inside of the door was corroded and pitted with rot, and even now thick tendrils of slimy oil reached out, bulged out from the doorway, screeching at Harry, demanding his blood.

'You know what to do, Lord Darkslayer.'

"Yeah..." Harry found a small smile. "But its gonna hurt like hell."

'The right thing always does.'

Harry nodded. He understood that, better than anyone. "Goodbye then, mysterious voice that may or may not exist."

'I'll be watching you, Harry. Stay out of trouble, okay.'

"No promises..."

The voice smiled. In his head, Harry felt it smile. He also thought he felt someone embrace him, gently, almost beyond all his senses... yet he felt safe.

'Madmen and demons promised you it would never be over, Harry Potter, yet here you are so very near the end. You've earned it; you've earned life a million times over. And I am really sorry for what happens next, but there is no meaning without pain... brace yourself, lad.'

Harry took a deep breath, that was all, and turned his back on Twilight

forever, as he fulfilled a ***Destiny*** of his own making... and ended his story at long last.

The End

THANKS FOR READING, PLEASE REVIEW.